THERE WERE NO NICE GIRLS IN THIS —

SIN CLUB

By DON ELLIOTT

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THIS IS AN ORIGINAL NIGHTSTAND BOOK

PASSIONATE STRIPPER!

Howard Durward was the head of a great British corporation, a man whose life was dedicated to making money — and the slightest breath of scandal could ruin that life, as well as the thousands of little people who held shares in his firm. So it was with fear and hesitation that he allowed himself to be cajoled into joining one of the infamous Soho Strip Clubs in the sinful underside of London. And there Howard Durward found love. In the eyes and the silken body of Julie Kent, a stripper who seemed miles above the coarse and naked voluptuaries who pranced and let their flesh jiggle on the stage. But even though they found passion together, even though he loved her and she felt desire only for him, this was a foredoomed affair. The sneaking columnist of the yellow tabloid, the fanatical Parliament member with a wild eye to curb all illicit sex in London, the prying and foul-mouthed who wanted to see Durward discredited . . . all these conspired to turn their love into a cesspool of twisted sin and depraved scandal!

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CHAPTER ONE

THE IDEA OF JOINING A SOHO STRIP CLUB in the first place was Puddy Laughton's. It was the sort of wild, larkish idea that can sweep quickly through a place like the Spartan Club after a few of the younger members have had a bit more than the usual amount of port or brandy.

Laughton said, "There's this place just off Wardour Street, not too far from here. Byron Robbins took me there last night, and it *is* the sexiest thing I've ever seen! The girls are unimaginably beautiful. And naked! It's a nakeder show than anything you've ever seen over in Paris, I warrant you!"

Sitting opposite the pudgy, volatile little Laughton was Howard Durward, at thirty-six the chief executive officer of Durward Ventures, Ltd., and one of the youngest self-made millionaires in the British Isles. He sipped his brandy thoughtfully and said, "Do naked girls on a stage fascinate you so much that you're willing to pay to look at them, Puddy?"

Laughton giggled. "I'd sooner pay a guinea to look at some fair lass's exterior than spend an evening in some dull theatre, right enough!"

"But still," Durward argued. "To join one of those places —to sit in the darkness amid the smell of sweat, the stale exhaust of clerks and schoolboys, watching a bunch of naked trollops waggle their bosoms at you — it seems repellent to me, Puddy."

"What's the trouble, Durward?" asked Tom Birrell, one of the Conservative Members of Parliament, and at forty-two considered definite Cabinet potential. "Are you above looking at naked women?"

"Of course not," Durward said with a smile.

"Then why not join this club of Puddy's?"

Durward shrugged and said, "I've just told you. It's some seamy, sordid little hole in the wall, and the girls are probably nothing but tarts, and ugly tarts at that. The sort of girls you wouldn't look at twice if they had their clothes on."

"See here, Durward," Laughton said with a touch of anger. "You haven't been there, and I have. So how can you sit there telling me the place is sordid and the girls are ugly?"

"It stands to reason they would be. Otherwise they'd be out on the streets earning much more."

"But I've *been* there, dammit," Laughton insisted.

"And I tell you the girls are *beautiful.*"

"Puddy would think any girl without clothes on is beautiful," Durward said in a dry aside that drew howls of malicious laughter from everyone but the now glowing Laughton.

"I know what you're afraid of, Durward," said Paul Martlett, a stockbroker seated at Durward's left. "You're afraid that Finch-Starrett or one of the other columnists for the popular press will catch you there. You think it'll compromise you in some way, eh? Brilliant young industrialist seen in den of iniquity. Is this the sort of man we want running our great corporations? Et cetera, et cetera ad nauseam. Is that it?"

Durward shook his head. "I'm not afraid of Finch-Starrett or any of that breed. I've got no secrets to hide from them, and I'm not troubled by any scandal they might bother to invent about me."

"Then why not join the club?" Laughton asked.

"You're so very eager, Puddy," Durward said crisply.

"Oh, relax, Durward," Tom Birrell said. "Stop being so sanctimonious and unbend a bit, won't you? I've heard this is quite an attractive place, and the people who go there are of the best. It isn't a cheap outfit, you know. I'd rather like to take a peek."

Durward glanced around, and saw that not only Laughton but Birrell and Martlett seemed anxious to sign up for this strip-tease club. A faint smile crossed Durward's face. If his friends were so eager, well, he would go with them. He wasn't puritan, by any means. And Birrell and Martlett were right: there was no need for him to be so damned strait-laced and self-conscious these days. Or did he really care what the tabloid press

had to say about him?

"Very well," he said crisply. "Lead us to this club of yours, Puddy."

The four of them left the Sparton Club, stepping out into the cool air of an April London night. This was a mild spring, the mildest Durward could remember in years, and it argued a hot summer to come.

They walked down Shaftesbury Avenue from their club, down the four blocks to the crossing with Wardour Street. As always, Durward had to make an effort to adjust his pace to that of his friends. He was six-three, and a lanky six-three at that. Birrell and Martlett were stocky six-footers, Laughton a globular five-eight who had to huff and puff to keep up with the others.

Durward's mind was less on the strip-tease than on tomorrow's negotiations. He had a healthy appreciation both of women and sex, but neither subject was a fixation for him the way it seemed to be for Laughton, and Durward had reached his present high position through hard work, not through lechery. Laughton, after all, had inherited his money. With your father a successful market plunger who dies leaving you an income of twenty thousand a year, you can afford to fritter away your time on inconsequentials.

Durward had had no such advantages. What he had, he had built on his own.

He was head of a holding corporation that made venture-capital investments. They selected a promising small company, took it over, pumped capital into it, and then either sold out at a handsome profit or continued operating the company at an even handsomer one. Currently, Durward Ventures, Ltd. was negotiating for a

small, privately-owned electronics corporation with some unusual and advanced automation techniques. The agreed takeover price was 50,000 shares of Durward Ventures common stock — roughly a hundred thousand pounds' worth in the current market, with Durward stock quoted at just under two guineas the share. But there were rumblings that the mighty E. M. I. combine was also interested in a takeover, and Durward was uneasy about that. He could never hope to outbid a corporate titan like E. M. I. if they really set themselves to make the acquisition. What was a hundred thousand pounds to a corporation whose annual gross was in the neighborhood of seventy *millions,* after all?

"You're worrying, Howard," Puddy Laughton said, catching up with him.

"Am I?"

"You're worrying yourself right into an ulcer. I can tell. That's why I suggested you get out of the club and over to see some bare-bottomed beauties. Do you some good."

"You're kind to look after me, Puddy," Durward said with a warm smile.

"Tell you what else you ought to do, if you're minded to listen to me."

"Go ahead." Durward said.

"You listen to me, you take some sweet lass and get yourself off to the Riviera for a rest, Howard."

Durward shook his head. "I've got to see the Dynamic Automation thing through, you know."

"After the takeover, then. The very next day after the merger is signed," Puddy said. "Go on a holiday. You need it, Howard. I'll lend you my brother's villa at Nice."

"Very kind of you, old fellow. But it's only April, you know. Much too cold for swimming on the Riviera."

"Go to the Caribbean, then! Go to Jamaica, go to Trinidad," Laughton said. "I think you can afford the fare, Howard. Go to India! It's warm enough there."

"You seem anxious to get rid of me," Durward said. "Got your eye on some girl who's hopelessly in love with me, is that your secret?"

"Pretty bloody unlikely," Laughton retorted. "I just want you to get some rest. I worry about you."

"Good of you," Durward said.

They made a right turn, off Shaftesbury and into Wardour Street. Now the neighborhood changed abruptly, from the Victorian splendor of Shaftesbury to the seedy, faintly sinister atmosphere of Soho. In place of glowing theaters and fine restaurants and the massive facades of private gentlemen's clubs like the Spartan there were two-story buildings with decayed shops along the street level and even more decayed flats above them. The shops seemed to be of the worst kind, Durward thought, the kind that sold glossy photographs of naked girls being menaced by whips, the kind of stores that sold the whips too, and other and stranger appliances, the kind of stores that sold frayed and coverless magazines and books imported in bulk lots from the United States. Girls stood in the doorways of each darkened shop, teen-age girls with hard-eyes and soft lips, with absurdly peroxided hair, with grotesquely swollen breasts genuinely or falsely puffing out the cashmere softness of their tight sweaters. In darker corners of the street lurked the Teddy Boys, the teen-age toughs

in their fanciful high-fashion clothes and their greasy, piled-up hair. And, in still more obscure corners, there hovered the ponces, the pimps watching over their girls to make certain nothing took place that they did not know about.

Durward walked along, repelled by the sordidness of the street. This was a new development in London, he thought. There had always been prostitutes, of course, and he saw every reason why there should be. But these other things — the sinister shops, and the strip clubs, and the greasy-haired Teddy Boys — they were new.

He agreed with Laughton: he needed a rest. He had been driving himself furiously all winter, moving from one challenge to the next, and promising himself that he would take a holiday just as soon as the next deal was concluded. But before one deal was over, a new one arose. A shrewd capitalist could make many fortunes in these boom-time days, and Durward had nearly doubled his holdings over the past sixteen months.

What's wrong with you, though? he asked himself. *Do you want all the money in the world? Is that it? Are you greedy? Be a gentleman, Durward. You could sell out now, and never feel the need of a farthing again the rest of your life. Why drive yourself over the brink of exhaustion?*

But he knew that it was nothing so simple as greed that drove him on. True, once upon a time, a decade back, he had wanted money desperately. But now he had more money than he could possibly spend in one lifetime. Something else kept him going, the thrill of the chase, the excitement of pursuit and success. Once you had gone fox-hunting two or three times, you did

not simply retire from the hunt because you had been in on the catch. It got into your veins. It was the same thing here. Once you had caught a million pounds or two, once you had captured a few corporations, you did not simply throw up your hands and retire to the sidelines.

No, Durward thought. *You kept at it. Until ulcers or a coronary stroke brought you down ten years before your time. That's the stupidity of it all.*

"Here we are," Puddy Laughton announced.

They had reached what seemed like a very bright and gaudy oasis indeed in the dark and gloomy street. Neon signs proclaimed garishly that this was the Merriment Revue Club, with smaller signs letting it be known that admission was by membership only. A brisk clientele was scurrying within.

"Sure you don't want to skip it now, Durward?" Paul Martlett asked him slyly.

"I'm here, am I not?" Durward said, more irritated than he knew he ought to be.

"You *do* need a rest," Puddy Laughton said quietly. "You bite everyone's head off these days over the pettiest things. Well, shall we go in?"

They entered a lobby as plush and as brightly-lit as the lobby of any Oxford Street movie house. An impeccably-uniformed doorman, as dignified of expression as any House of Commons usher, stood to the right of the door. To the left, a pleasant-faced woman in her thirties sat behind the brass wickets of a box office.

Puddy Laughton strode over. "We'd like to join the club," he announced.

"Certainly, sir. How many?"

"Four," Laughton said.

"Very good, sir. Membership is one guinea, renewable every three months. Admission to any of the early shows is seventeen and six, one guinea for the late show. Above the cost of membership, of course."

"Fine," Laughton said. "This'll cover four memberships." He put down a five-pound note. The woman smiled at it and shook her head.

"I'm sorry, sir. You'll have to fill out your applications and they'll have to be approved before I can take your money. It's the regulations."

"Very formal here," Martlett whispered to Durward.

Durward nodded and smiled. These clubs were sticklers for the regulations, apparently, and small wonder; you never knew whether four imposing gents trying to buy memberships were special investigators or not, and it wouldn't do to lose a lucrative cabaret license. The philosophy of these clubs was simple enough. The government had the right to regulate the goings-on in a public place like a theater or a night club. But centuries-old tradition maintained that what took place behind the doors of a private club was inviolate. The government could not meddle. Anything up to and including after-hours drinking and public fornication could take place without penalty of law in a private club, admission to members only.

Durward studied the membership application. It seemed unusually detailed. It wanted not only his name, home and business address, but the name of his banker as well. And a string of regulations were printed below the lines to be filled in. The application was void if false information were given, it said. Members would have to sign the register every time they attended. They

could bring guests at the regular rate and sign for them. And half a dozen similar statements of operation.

He debated putting down some name not his own, and decided against it. He had nothing to hide, was not afraid of being seen here, and certainly didn't care to perpetrate a fraud. With a flourish, he signed his name on the dotted line.

Laughton collected the applications. "Memberships are my treat," he said. "After all, I dragged you all here."

The woman in the box office studied the four applications carefully for a moment before nodding and taking Laughton's fiver. Then, as she filled out the cards of membership, she said, "Next show's at half past eight, gentlemen. Still a few seats left, if you like, or you could come back for the ten-forty-five, or whenever you please."

"Let's go in now," Laughton said. Martlett and Birrell nodded.

The woman gave them seat reservations and told them that they could wait in the lounge for the twenty minutes until the show began. They entered, climbing stairs carpeted lavishly. At the first landing, an attractive but fully-dressed girl in her twenties gave them a misty-eyed smile and said in a husky whisper, "Would you sign the registry book, please? Are you all members?"

"Yes indeed," Laughton said.

They signed one at a time, the girl comparing the signatures in the book to the signatures on their cards, and with a final nod of approval she let them go through. They emerged into a large, gaily-lit lounge, decorated with mirrors and abstractionist chandeliers.

Waiters in red jackets bustled about from table to table.

They sat down. Almost immediately, a waiter with long sideburns and a Grecian profile came up to their table. "Doors open in fifteen minutes, gentlemen. Care for a drink or two before she begins? Take it right in with you if you aren't finished. Sandwich, perhaps?"

He distributed drink lists. "I'll have the three-star brandy," Martlett said.

"The same," said Durward.

Birrell and Laughton ordered port; they had a 1927 on the card that attracted both of them.

"I'll have to see your membership cards before I can serve you intoxicating liquors here," the waiter said with a grin. "Guests not permitted to make purchases. It's the rules."

They flashed their cards, and the waiter headed to the bar with their order.

"Plenty of regulations here," Martlett said.

"It gives the place an atmosphere of legality," said Birrell. "I say, it's not cheap, is it?"

"Not at all," Durward said. "A guinea for membership, seventeen-and-six every time you want to see a show, five bob for a drink — this isn't a poor man's club at all."

"The lower classes have their own clubs," Laughton said. "Down the street. Not like this at all."

"I suppose you've been in them all, Puddy," Durward said.

Laughton colored. "Well, some of them."

"What are they like?" Birrell asked, with genteel curiosity.

Laughton said, "Well, they're usually converted shops, you know, on street level. You pay ten bob to

join, and then something like seven-and-sixpence every time you come. It's a continuous show, by which they mean that you can walk in at any time from eleven in the morning till midnight and there'll be a show going on. One strip act at a time, no chorus girls or music or anything. The girls are usually quite young and frightened. They come out and take their clothes off, and get applause, and go off stage, and for the next fifteen minutes the management tries to sell you drinks. The strippers come out and mingle. Then the lights dim and it's time for the next act. It goes on that way, a poor girl disrobing every fifteen minutes on and on."

"The same girl?" Birrell asked.

"Oh, no, no. These places usually have four or five. A girl will do perhaps one act an hour. But they seem to work all day and all night. Poor frightened little girls. There's no artistry about those places at all."

"Whereas there is about this?" Durward asked sardonically.

"Oh, devil yes," Laughton said. "There can be something deucedly artistic about a girl's getting undressed, Howard, didn't you know that?"

"Perhaps Durward's been too busy making his money to learn to appreciate the things you appreciate, Puddy," Tom Birrell said.

"Let's not underestimate our friend Durward," Martlett put in. "He may seem sober-sided and respectable, but he's got a darker side. He *must*"

There was general laughter. Durward tried to be a good sport about the teasing he was coming in for He downed his drink, hoping the warm brandy would relax him.

Then it was time to enter the theater itself. It was a smallish auditorium, built to seat some hundred fifty or two hundred patrons, with the seats going right smack up to the edge of the stage. Durward and his friends had been given good seats, in the sixth row, slightly to the left.

The audience consisted predominantly of well-dressed men in their thirties and forties. There was only a scattering of women, all of them looking thoroughly married to the men at their sides. Judging from the smattering of conversation Durward was picking up, most of the men here were regulars who had seen the current show many times and knew the capabilities and dimensions of the leading performers.

It was, Durward had to admit, an attractive and congenial place to spend a few dull hours of a spring evening. It was certainly no worse than sitting around at the club, fingering the *Financial Times* or perhaps the *Spectator*.

The six-piece orchestra struck up a jaunty number. A master-of-ceremonies appeared, welcomed everyone to the Merriment Revue Club. The curtains parted and a dozen girls, nude except for high boots and blue panties, pranced out and began to do a standard chorus-line routine.

Durward watched them without interest. They were nearly nude, yes. But what of that? Bare breasts: jiggling lumps of flesh. Some of the girls weren't even attractive. A few had embarrassingly small breasts, and one had great dangling blue-veined udders that were enough to put you off women for a week. Puddy Laughton was staring raptly, but Durward felt annoyance at having let himself be trapped into watching this

dreary parade of dull-eyed and mindless drabs.

But then the chorus-line receded behind the curtains, and the *compere* appeared again, elegant in his wavy hair and tux. "Friends of the Merriment Revue Club, we have an exceptional treat for you tonight. Now, we know full well that it's bad show business to lead off with your high point, but this girl's so special that we simply can't keep her for last. We *have* to let you see her. Ladies and gentlemen, we present, in her premiere engagement at the Merriment Revue Club, the sensational Julie Kent!"

The curtains parted.

A girl came out, fully dressed, and smiled at the audience.

Durward was astonished by the force of his reaction. The mere sight of her was like a knife, twisting in his vitals. She was beautiful, unimaginably beautiful, the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. The mere thought that he was going to be privileged to see her nude or nearly nude brought a cold sweat to his forehead. His heart raced.

He leaned forward in his seat, tense and perplexed by his own sudden excitement, as Julie Kent began her act.

CHAPTER TWO

SHE WAS A GIRL OF MEDIUM HEIGHT, no more than five feet five, and she could not have been older than twenty-two or twenty-three. Her beauty was the beauty of simple perfection, not of lush overabundance. She had silky golden-blonde hair that trailed to her shoulders. Her eyes were deep blue, her skin pale with pink undertones. Her face had a kind of classic serenity, with its long lashes and its thin, tapering nose, its flawless golden brows, its full lips and firm chin. She was dressed in a tight ankle-length gown that hinted at supple loveliness beneath.

And there was the unmistakable light of intelligence

in her eyes. That was the surprising thing. That was what held Durward riveted in attention as much as anything else. She did not seem like the sort of weary ex-prostitute who had turned to stripping because it was a less strenuous life. Rather, she seemed like the sort of girl one might meet at a Mayfair dance, the sort one might see in the better shops on Bond Street or Regent Street. A *person* in other words. Someone you would want to get to know.

And there she was, this radiantly lovely young girl, on stage taking off her clothes before an audience of nearly two hundred, mostly men.

She was singing. Her voice was light but yet affecting, true to pitch and gentle in tone. She was repeating some silly words about how she found herself alone in the countryside on a beautiful day beside a lovely stream, and couldn't resist the temptation to have a swim. But the words didn't matter. Durward hardly listened. It was the tone, the sweetness, the sureness.

And she seemed to be singing directly to *him*.

She had the top buttons of her dress open, now. Dancing slowly back and forth on the stage, reeling off verse after verse of the repetitious song, she opened button after button, drew a zipper down her side, and pulled the dress over her head. Little specks of color seemed to flare in her cheeks as she stood revealed in bra, panties, garter-belt, stockings, and slip. The slip came next.

Then, with incredibly drawn-out motions that artfully enhanced the suspense of the moment, she rested against the side of the stage to unclip her garters and roll the stockings down. She tossed them gaily into the wings. She was an odd mixture, equal parts of sauciness

and innocence. She could almost be a virgin, Durward thought, except that it wasn't too likely to find a virgin in this line of employ.

Now she was removing the bra. It came away easily and Durward saw the color rise to her cheeks as her breasts were bared. They were handsome breasts, high and full, firm-looking, two round globes of pale flesh tipped with delicate little nipples that were standing up stiffly at attention. The sight of her breasts obliterated all thought of the chorus line. Julie Kent was neither flat-chested nor a cow; she had a perfect figure, matched in wonderful proportions to the width of her shoulders and the tapering line of her throat. Her breasts seemed to flow outward from her body in magical contours designed by a master's hand.

Bare-breasted, she move about the stage, smiling, delighting in an innocent way in her own semi-nudity, shaking her breasts and making them jiggle and jounce in a way that would be lascivious in any other stripper, merely playful in her. That was her secret, Durward was convinced. There was no lewdness in her act. And so she could seem every man's private mistress, even every man's private bride, without once reminding the onlookers that they were seeing a coarse and shameless hussy. It made for more attractive inner fantasies that way.

It was time for the panties to go, now. She rolled them down over the flaring fullness of her hips, stepped lithely out of them, tossed them out of sight. She turned, displaying the lavish beauty of her curved buttocks, of her white-as-milk thighs. In a moment, the garter-belt was off too, and she stood mother-naked before the audience.

There was no trace of embarrassment now that all garments were off. She stood there without even the interposition of a G-string, looking nuder than nude in a stripper's shaven nakedness. Smiling now, she circled the stage, leaning forward to make her breasts sway in that mingled sensuality and virginality of hers, singing in a soft voice now to a blockly, bald-headed man at the right of the stage, now to a goggling-eyed twenty-five-year-old down center. She smiled outward, seemingly looking directly at Durward.

He grew tenser and tenser. There was the ache of desire in his body.

He wanted her, he knew.

But not just as a bed ornament. He was totally captivated by this girl he did not know. He wanted to talk to her, to learn what made her earn her living this way. He wanted to be her friend as well as her lover.

There she was, naked. Gorgeous breasts, creamy buttocks, all exposed. Dancing seductively, enticingly. Nothing hidden, nothing held back.

Nothing of her body, that is. Only the self behind the blue eyes was veiled and enigmatic.

Durward's jaws ached with the mounting excitement within him. He was often too busy for women, often went several weeks at a time without one. There were women he knew who kept company with him when he needed them, good women, attractive women who sat next to him at the opera or shared his bed as the need arose.

But this Julie Kent was different. He coveted her. He longed desperately to spend a night by her side, to feel the silky smoothness of those breasts pressing against the palms of his hands to harbor his body

against her, to join his body with hers and in some way partake of that cool, serene beauty of hers —

The act was ending now.

The naked girl was dancing off, to the accompaniment of tumultuous applause.

The M. C. was back again, full of his synthetic patter. "Wasn't that something, ladies and gentlemen? Wasn't she absolutely unique? Worth coming back to the good old Merriment Revue Club night after night? Let me tell you, we can't get over her. And neither will any of you, I confidently predict. But now on to our next number — "

Durward sat back in his seat, letting the rigid tension drain out of him. Puddy Laughton turned to him and said, "That was a bit of all right, wasn't it, old fellow?"

"I'll say," Durward said hoarsely.

"I couldn't help noticing," Laughton said, "the way your attention was riveted on her. You were really captivated, eh, Howard?"

Durward tried to sound casual. "She's certainly an attractive girl."

"That she is."

"You saw her last night, Puddy?"

"Yes. That's why I was so eager to come back."

"How long does a girl continue to perform at a place like this?" Durward asked.

"They change the show every four months. The girls all rotate from one club to another, and sometimes they go off to Paris for a change of air."

Durward nodded. The next number was starting, now — the chorus again, strutting up and down in diapers. He watched without interest, his mind's eye

still blinded by the radiant beauty of Julie Kent.

The succession of acts bored him to distraction. There was a comedian, who, surprisingly enough, made only two off-color jokes, apologizing in advance for both of them, and spent the rest of his time in not very funny comments about the government and the international situation. There was an exotic French stripper with cat-like eyes and cat-like grace, who did a torrid act that ended up with her sprawled on her back, pounding her buttocks against the mattress that was her sole prop and performing a totally convincing imitation of love making ending up with a thoroughly overwhelming imaginary climax. Birrell seemed impressed by that act; Durward was faintly revolted by the unfettered sexuality of it, and the girl was big-breasted and coarse-featured in the bargain.

The show went on for an hour and a half, with fifteen minutes of intermission at the midway point. It was a parade of nudity such as Durward had never seen, not on any visit to France nor anywhere else. But the final eighty minutes of the program were pure anticlimax for him. He waited — in vain — for a second glimpse of Julie Kent. But she returned only at the final curtain call, dressed once again in the ankle-length gown.

Durward and his companions filed out of the auditorium. The adjoining lounge was filled every table taken — a full house waiting for the late show.

"They're always sold out?" Durward asked.

Laughton nodded. "Just about. At six o'clock they get the lads coming straight from their offices, at half past eight the men who've had dinners downtown and are in the mood for some fun, and at the late show the night-owls. There entirely different clienteles."

"That means they must gross some five hundred pounds a night on admissions alone!" Durward said. "And at least as much more on drinks and sandwiches."

"Not to mention the membership fee that has to be renewed every three months," Martlett said.

"The gross must be close to four thousand a week," Durward said. "Perhaps more. And I'm sure the girl's are paid little enough. Imagine taking away perhaps a hundred thousand pounds a year in profits on a place like this!"

"Look at the gleam in his eyes," Birrell said playfully. "Our financier is thinking of another takeover, I'll wager. Eh, Durward,"

Martlett said, "A new Durward Venture. You could set up a chain of these clubs from here to Edinburgh. Of course, you might be asked to resign from a few of the more respectable organizations you belong to, but it'd be worth it for a chance to make another few million quid a year, Durward. Eh?"

"Very funny," Durward said unsmilingly They passed through the crowded lounge and down the stairs. "But I wonder what the girls do get paid. Do you have any idea, Puddy?"

"The star performers get thirty to fifty pounds a week, I'd imagine," Laughton said. "The chorus girls a bit less, say twenty quid or so. If a girl's really in demand, I imagine she can make about ninety or a hundred pounds a week at one of these places."

"A really attractive girl ought to be able to do just about as well as a streetwalker," Durward said.

"Yes of course," said Laughton. "But you never need an abortion just by having men *look* at you. It's a whole lot messier on the streets. In here, there are

no bribes to pay, no ponces to keep, no pregnancies to watch out for. Besides, the girls at the Merriment only work some six hours. That leaves them plenty of time to pad out their incomes in other ways."

Durward nodded. He was in a strange mood, and he was eager to get out of here and back to his bachelor flat quickly. But, as the four men were passing through the lobby, a side door opened and a short, plump man in his fifties appeared, scuttling rapidly across the foyer and calling out, "Mr. Durward! Mr. Durward!"

Durward turned, peeved at having his name shouted in a place like this.

"Yes," he said.

The man came up to him and extended a warm, moist, soft hand. "It's a great honor to have you here, sir. I was excited when I saw your name on tonight's register. I'm Lucien D'amato, the proprietor. I want to say again, it's an honor to have men like you here. We have many important people like you on our list. Financiers, company directors, corporation presidents — "

The man seemed friendly and good-natured enough, but Durward was embarrassed by his effusive chatter. "You have a very fine show here, Mr. — ah — D'amato."

"So glad you liked it. And you too, Mr. Birrell. Do you know, you're the ninth Member of Parliament on the roster here? Five Conservatives, four Labor. So you've tipped the balance for your party. And you, Mr. Martlett — aways a delight to have important figures of the City here. And Mr. Laughton — hope we'll see all of you again soon — our door stands open — I've given instructions that you're to be given the best available

seats — "

Still chattering, D'amato followed the foursome out into the street, thanking them again for their patronage before finally making a sticky goodbye and returning to his establishment.

"Talkative fellow," Birrell said.

"And knowledgeable, too," said Martlett. "Called off our names without mixing us up at all."

"That's not so hard," Laughton said. "Tom and Howard have had their pictures all over the newspapers all year. He knew me from last night. So the only doubtful party was yourself, Paul. Believe me, a man like that becomes an expert at flattering his clientele."

"I hate to be shouted to that way," Durward said.

"It's the price of fame," Birrell said. "Once you start getting your photo in the papers, you've got to be putting up with getting recognized all over the place."

Laughton turned to Durward. "Well, Howard? How'd you like it?"

"Not bad."

"Think you'll go back?"

"I might," Durward said.

"Be a pity to waste that membership card, wouldn't it?" Martlett said. "It's good for eighty-nine more days."

"I might just look in here again, yes," Durward said. "Rather nice place. Not at all the low-class dive I was expecting. I thank you, Puddy. I'm in a much better mood than I was earlier. Well, goodnight, all. I'll see you tomorrow, I suppose."

Turning, Durward hailed a cab and boarded it before any of the other three could suggest that they go somewhere for drinks. It was half past ten. They

would probably make a night of it, perhaps pick up some whores or some sightseeing American girls. Durward often joined them. He and Laughton were bachelors, Birrell divorced, Martlett a widower of a year's standing.

But not tonight, Durward thought.

Tonight he wanted to get home and ponder this strange thing that had happened to him, this unexpected burst of emotion and desire that had flooded his reserved, well-controlled soul.

"Where to, guv'nor?" the cabbie asked.

"Mount Street at Park Lane."

The taxi started off. "Been at the Merriment, have you, guv'nor?"

"That's right."

"Some swell place, hey?"

"Quite nice," Durward said.

"I was there last week. Some girls. They've got one, this blonde, she's new there. Real class. I forget her name — "

"Julie Kent?"

"That's it, guv'nor. Julie Kent. She isn't really sexy, you know, I mean all fire-breathing and wriggly like the other girls. But she gets to you. Deep down where you feel it. Know what I mean?"

"I know exactly what you mean," Durward said.

He was home just before eleven, after the journey westward. Durward lived in a seven-room flat overlooking Hyde Park and situated between London's two most elegant hotels. He lived alone. A woman came in to tidy up every day, but aside from her he had no staff, neither cook nor butler nor chauffeur nor private sec-

retary. He preferred it that way. The only meal he took at home was breakfast, which he could manage for himself, so there was no need of a cook. He could type his own correspondence, so there was no call for a private secretary, and he preferred to keep business matters out of the home in any event. He had two cars, a Jaguar racer and a Bentley limousine, both of them parked in a specially reserved area in front of the house, and he was perfectly capable of driving either of them himself, though he usually relied on cabs in the hectic London streets. When he entertained at home, which was not often, he hired people for the day. It was simpler all around, that way Too many of the men he knew spent cluttered lives, with servant impinging at every turn of the way.

He let himself into the darkened flat and entered his study, a handsome room lined with books on every wall, from floor to ceiling. He had read many of the books, but by no means all. Having been serving in Egypt while most of his friends were attending Oxford or Cambridge, he had been forced to make up his education on his own. He had mastered the books, though he could never compensate for the social disadvantage of having no university ties.

Going to the low liquor cabinet along the left-hand wall, he slid out a bottle of his best cognac eighty-year-old stuff picked up on his last trip to France, and reflectively poured himself a tall shot. He rolled the brandy about in the snifter, inhaling it. He took a sip and closed his eyes in satisfaction.

Immediately he saw the figure of Julie Kent against the backdrop of his eyelids. She was nude, her breasts flecked with glossy perspiration-beads, and

she was holding out her arms to him, urging him to take her, and he saw himself advancing toward her, embracing her, moving with wonderful ease into the welcoming warmth of her body, and now they were moving with the rhythm of people long familiar with each other, and his hands were touching the tautness of her buttocks, and she was making little gasping sounds of pleasure deep in her lovely throat, her breasts rising and falling with the agitation of fulfillment, and —

Durward opened his eyes.

What's happen to me? he asked himself. *Puddy must be right. I need a vacation. If I can get this wild over a silly little blonde child who prances around nude in front of six hundred men a night —*

But this was no matter for cold logic and reason. He gulped down half his cognac as though it were cheap sherry, and set the snifter down. Going hastily into the adjoining den, he snatched up the section of the London telephone book containing the K's.

He thumbed through it feverishly. Plenty of Kents, but no Julie. Of course not. It was probably just a stage name. And, in any event, a stripper wouldn't list herself in the telephone book. She'd be bombarded with phonecalls all the time if she did, Durward thought. *Phonecalls from* — the admission was bitter —*from admiring fools like me.*

He put away the phone book.

It was impossible, he told himself. He had his good name to uphold. There were certain things a man in his position simply could not do. Think of the scandal, the whispering, the scorn. A rising businessman, the center of all attention in the financial world, could not afford to have even a brief affair with a

Soho stripper. A night in bed, perhaps. But no more. Nothing that would last long enough for snoopers to uncover it.

Absolutely impossible.

Durward finished off his brandy, went into his bedroom, and began slowly to undress. He was going to have to forget Julie Kent, that was all there was to it. This was an insane infatuation. He'd have to forget her. As simple as that.

CHAPTER THREE

ALL THE SAME, HE WENT BACK to the Merriment Revue Club the next night. And he went alone. He finished up at his office about five, after a long and frustrated day in which no progress whatever was made on the Dynamic Automation take-over. It was becoming clear that the directors of Dynamic Automation were starting to get coy about their company's worth, as if holding out for a higher price than had originally been discussed. Durward was willing to take his bid up another 10,000 pounds or so, but no more. Beyond that, it started getting into the realm of quite a risky speculation, and he was as concerned for his reputation

as a man who never made a mistake as he was for his profits.

Leaving the office most nights, he would take a cab over to the Spartan Club for a not-very-Spartan dinner. Tonight though, he went directly to the Merriment, which was quite an altogether different sort of club. He showed his card, was admitted with warm smiles, and went to the lounge, where he fed himself on smoked salmon sandwiches at eight shillings apiece until it was time for the six o'clock show to begin.

The auditorium was all but filled. This time Durward had a center seat, right down front. He slouched back, blanking out his mind while the M. C. made his same old opening remarks, while the same old overture was played, while the same old chorus girls dragged their jiggling bosoms around the stage. Presumably, Durward thought, there was plenty of repeat attendance during the four months a show lasted, and it was a wonder the clients didn't get bored. On second thought, he could see why. Each patron who came back probably came back for a specific act, just as he had. The rest of the show didn't matter. They would all be willing to watch that one special act hundreds of times.

Durward wondered uncomfortably how many men in the present audience had come back here tonight for the express purpose of watching Julie Kent.

Quite a few, it would seem, because when Julie made her appearance attention pricked up all over the house. The act was the same as last night's. Except that she saw Durward and smiled to him, even waved at one point. When she was completely nude, she came over, stood with legs apart right in front of

him. His gaze travelled up her body, past the superb calves, the firm thighs, past her loins and flat belly, her jutting breasts, to the serene splendor of her face and golden hair.

She was smiling.

At him.

He was tense and tight all over again. The moment her act ended, he rose, cutting toward the exit while the applause resounded.

Durward went into the lounge. It remained open all through the performance, to accomodate those who showed up an hour or more early for the next show and wished to while away the time with drinks and sandwiches. A waiter came over and Durward said, "Brandy, please."

"I'll have to see your membership card — "

"Certainly." Durward displayed it and said, "By the way, is Mr. D'amato about? I'd like very much to see him, if I could."

"I'll check, Mr. Durward."

The waiter was gone a few minutes. Then he reappeared, the fat figure of the proprietor waddling along beside him. D'amato was carrying Durward's drink. He had a worried expression on his face.

"You don't like the show tonight, Mr. Durward?" D'amato asked, setting the brandy down carefully and taking a seat opposite the financier.

"Of course I liked it."

"Then why walk out after ten minutes? I see you come in, I check the roster and you are going to the six o'clock show, next thing I know the show is just barely started and you have walked out and are sitting in the lounge wanting to talk to me. I want my friends

to have a good time here."

Durward passed up the reference to himself as a "friend" of D'amato's without comment. He said, "I've seen the part of the show I came here tonight to see, D'amato. The rest is all very good, but it doesn't interest me to the same extent. Do you follow me?"

D'amato soft-cheeked, jowly face darkened. He looked, Durward thought, like a pudgy, overgrown baby of fifty-odd. There was little guile in those wide eyes.

D'amato said, "I think I understand."

Durward spread his hands. "D'amato, exactly how hard is it for one to get a date with one of your girls?"

"It depends."

"On what?"

"Depends on the situation. A man is a friend of mine, someone I can trust, I may give him an introduction. If I don't like him, I don't. Maybe you don't really understand how I feel about these girls. Some owners, they exploit them for all they're worth. I could tell you stories that would disgust you, Mr. Durward, because I know you're a man of breeding, you'd be horrified. But here it's different. I think of the girls like they're my daughters. I don't want them getting in any trouble. Some people come in here, they think because a girl shows herself naked on a stage, she's a bad girl. It isn't so. You know, two of my girls, they're married, happily married? And others are real respectable. I don't deny we get some raw ones, but most of them — " D'amato paused. "So you see, I don't run a brothel here. But for you, it would be an honor to give you an introduction."

"Provided you'll keep quiet, of course," Durward

said.

"I'm the soul of discretion. Which girl are you interested in, Mr. Durward?"

Durward moistened his lips. "Julie Kent."

D'amato's clear eyes, clouded. "Of course. She is so beautiful. Everyone wants an introduction to Julie Kent."

"Will you do it for me?"

"I've refused many, Mr Durward. She's not like the other girls. She's — aloof, that's the word. I hope you're not simply thinking she's an easy seduction, because she's not."

Durward frowned. "I resent those words, Mr. D'amato. I'm not that kind of person."

"Of course not, of course. I apologize even for implying it. But you know how some other people are — well, this girl, she's special. She'll show herself, yes, but she has her pride, she doesn't do things men ask her to do, she's no tramp, believe me. And that's why a gentleman like you is attracted to her, I'm positive. I'll go talk to her. I'll see how she feels. I'll be right back, Mr. Durward."

D'amato scuttled away. Durward tried to relax. The strip-club proprietor was a good sort. Durward decided. Over-eager, a flatterer, a soft-talker, but basically all right. He seemed genuinely protective toward his girls. But perhaps he felt that a Durward-Julie romance would lend class to the establishment. Durward hoped profoundly that D'amato was the kind who could keep his mouth shut. For one dizzy moment he pictured D'amato peddling the story to some professional gossip-monger like Harold Finch-Starrett, and he had to fight back the impulse to bolt and run. But he remained.

A few minutes later, D'amato returned. "She's in her dressing-room," he said. "She's only on at the beginning of each show, you know, and she spends her time between shows reading."

"Will she see me?"

D'amato nodded. "It's the second dressing-room on the right. You go through that doorway over there. I told the guard you were coming."

Durward made his way through a passage and found himself in the backstage area. Naked and nearly-naked girls hustled back and forth, paying no attention to him. They were the chorus girls, getting into their costumes for their next number. Durward saw the male comedian wandering around among the girls, gaily paddling them on their bare buttocks with his cane, joking with them, teasing with them. They kept erupting into gales of laughter. Stupid trollops, he thought contemptuously.

He knocked on the second door.

"Miss Kent?"

"Who's there?"

"Howard Durward," he said, whispering as though he expected a tabloid gossip columnist to be lurking behind a nearby pile of canvas flats.

"Oh, do come in," she called.

He opened the door. The dressing-room was small but well furnished, brightly lit with fluorescents. A mirror was on the wall facing the door, and Julie Kent sat at a makeup table with back to him. She swung around to face him as he entered. She was wearing a gown that hung loosely open in front, revealing the lush curves of her breasts, but as his eyes fastened on her

nudity she drew the front of the gown together.

It was all right to prance around naked on stage in front of two hundred, Durward thought But one must cover one's breasts when alone with just one man. It made an odd kind of sense, he decided.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you," he began.

"Of course not. I don't have a thing to do for the next two hours except take a curtain-call, anyway. I was catching up on my reading." She indicated a book that lay face-down on the dressing table. Durward was agreeably surprised to find that it was a translation of a novel by one of the most avant-garde of French novelists.

"You like that sort of book?" he asked, trying not to seem to be amazed that a stripper should.

"I know the author," Julie said. "Met him last summer in Paris. A fascinating man. But I like his books, too. A pity I can't read French."

She spoke intelligently and well, with a middle-class accent that sounded like Leeds or Bradford. A college-educated stripper? Would wonders never cease.

Down to business, Durward thought. He tried not to let himself be disconcerted by the fact that her gown was all but transparent, and ended at the thigh. The physical measures of her was overpowering. He felt his fingers trembling, and angrily locked them together behind his back.

He said, "Perhaps Mr. D'amato told you, I was here last night, and was so attracted by you that I came back tonight."

"I saw you last night. I recognized you."

"You did, eh?"

"From your picture in Monday's *Times*."

"You read the *Times*, do you?"

"Only now and then. It's rather a bore, I'm afraid. I much prefer the *Guardian*. But I did see your picture. We get all sorts of important people here. I was rather fascinated with the idea of performing in front of Howard Durward."

"Do you think you could be fascinated with the idea of going someplace for a drink with Howard Durward?"

"I could indeed."

"How about now?"

"Oh, we're not allowed to leave the premises even when we're not on stage. I've got to stick it out here till midnight, I'm afraid."

"A pity," Durward said. "I thought we could nip out somewhere during the next two hours — "

"Sorry. Can't be done."

"Well, at midnight, then," he said.

She smiled warmly, and took her hand from the front of her gown. He could see the curving ripeness of her breasts practically down to the nipples, now. And she was only two yards from him. He resisted the urge to reach out, to seize her breasts, to squeeze the ripe apples of her bosom.

"Where shall we go?" she asked.

"There's a little skiffle club near Fleet Street. Would that be all right?"

"It would be splendid, Mr. Durward!"

"Howard."

"Howard," she said. "Suppose you meet me here after the final show. Say, just at midnight. We take our curtain-calls in street clothes, so I'll be ready to leave promptly."

"Superb," he said. "At midnight, then."

He beamed at her and made his way back past the gaggle of naked chorus girls, past the bare-breasted voluptuousness of one of the star strippers coming the opposite way, and out into the lounge again. D'amato was still there.

"Well?" he said.

"I'm meeting her at midnight," Durward said. "I hope I can count on your discretion in this matter, D'amato."

"Of course, of course." D'amato seemed positively bubbling with glee, like a father whose daughter has caught the eye of some bachelor viscount or duke "She's a wonderful girl. I hope everything works out just perfectly for the two of you, Mr. Durward. Just perfectly."

What the hell does he think I'm out for? Durward wondered. *Her hand in marriage? If he does, he's got the wrong idea. But definitely.*

He made his goodbyes and left the Merriment Revue Club. It was only half past six. He had an entire evening to kill before his date with Julie.

He walked briskly over to the Spartan Club.

Puddy Laughton and Paul Martlett were there, in their usual corner in the Smoking Room. A decanter of port stood on the table between them, its contents already well diminished. Martlett was thumbing through that day's number of the *Financial Times*, Laughton an American picture-magazine bright with color shots of naked models.

Laughton looked up at Durward. "Hello. Here's Howard. We missed you at dinner-time, Howard."

Durward shrugged evasively. "I was busy. Tom not here?"

"He's stuck down in Westminister," Martlett said. "Commons is having late sessions again. And you'll never guess what they're debating this time."

"A bill outlawing sexual intercourse?" Durward ventured.

Martlett laughed. "Close enough."

"Just the minor perversions?" Durward asked.

"It's the strip clubs," Laughton blurred.

"What?"

"Some fire-breathing do-gooder of an M. P. from the north country," Martlett said. "One of the real old-fashioned reforming kind. A pure Colonel Blimp."

"I thought they were dying out," Durward said.

"Not fast enough. This is a chap named Jarrell. Claude Jarrell. A retired Major, of course. With big bushy mustachioes and violent Conservative beliefs. He's a political opportunist, the kind always ready to denounce the Government for having let India and Burma slip from the grasp of the empire, you know?" Martlett chuckled. "Someone took him to a strip show the other week and he's slammed in a private Member s bill trying to outlaw them."

"But that's impossible," Durward said. "Parliament can't meddle with the goings-on in private clubs! It would be the end of all liberty in Great Britain!"

"Fat lot your Major Jarrells care for liberty," Martlett said. "It's types like that who advocate flogging for traffic violations and the death penalty for minor thefts, don't you know? So here he is raving and ranting against the shameless nudity that's purveyed in Soho. I shouldn't be surprised if he makes love to his

wife fully dressed. If he makes love to her at all."

Durward helped himself to some sherry. "Does the bill stand a chance of getting anywhere?"

"Not a chance, really. The Prime Minister himself's said the bill's asinine. When the tally comes, Jarrell won't be able to muster fifty votes. But he has to be heard, you know. Everyone's being tactful. You can't throttle a debate if a man wants to denounce sin."

"I hate those pious bastards," Durward said feelingly. "The red-faced, red-necked sanctimonious frauds who forever feel they must meddle in other's affairs. What business is it of Major Jarrell's whether or not girls take off their clothes in public?"

"He wants to keep good old Britain on a sound moral standard, don't you know?" Puddy Laughton said. "Here's to Major Jarrell! Long may he wave!"

Martlett said, "Were you kept late at your office tonight, Durward?"

"No, I — ah — well, it's rather a confidential matter, I'm afraid. I'd as soon not talk about it."

"Of course," Martlett said, with the automatic discretion of a man of honor. "I shan't pry. You know, of course, that shares in Durward Ventures took a bit of a tumble today?"

"Down one-and-threepence," Durward said. "Just a normal fluctuation."

"We heard a story that it was because the merger with Dynamic Automation is in difficulties," Martlett said. "I don't mean to pry, but — "

"But you'd like some inside information. Is that it, Paul?"

"Well, yes."

Durward moistened his lips. "Here it is, then, as

close to the inside as you're going to get. The merger's still on. The directors of Dynamic Automation are getting a bit sticky about the price, but I have no doubt that we'll ultimately come to terms."

"Any chance of a higher bid from a larger corporation?"

"Like E. M. I.?" Durward asked.

"They always have to be reckoned with, of course."

"Of course," Durward said. "And the answer is yes, they *are* sticking in their bloody oar just on an experimental basis. But it won't come to anything. We'll be announcing the formal takeover any day now, perhaps by the first of May, perhaps by the fifteenth."

"And then where will Durward Ventures turn?" Laughton asked. "Why not try to take over the Post Office Department next? Pick them up for a few hundred million quid, renovate them, sell them for a thousand million. Eh?"

"I'm afraid the Queen won't sell," Durward said. "Not even to me." He glanced at his watch. Half past seven. The evening was crawling along. The second show was still an hour away — and then there was all of that third show still to come, before Julie would be free.

He sipped his sherry thoughtfully. It would really astonish Laughton and Martlett, he reflected, if he told them that he had a date with that gloriously beautiful stripper at midnight. But he couldn't say anything. He couldn't let anyone at all know, not even his closest friends.

Martlett said, "I think it's only fair to tell you some of the stories that have been going around concerning you and this Dynamic merger, Durward."

"Such as?"

The stockbroker frowned uncomfortably. "Well, mind you, this is the worst sort of City rumor-mongering, nothing more. Nobody of any real substance puts credence in it."

"Go ahead," Durward said. tensely. "What are you driving at?"

"Well," Martlett said, "The substance of it is that the chairman of the automation firm is a bit doubtful of you. He thinks you're rather an adventurer, Durward, and he's not sure he wants to let you take over his firm. He's suspicious of anyone who's so rich so young He rather thinks there's something shady about your career."

"That's absurd!" Puddy Laughton exploded. "Why, old Howard is respectable to a fault!"

"Of course he is," Martlett said firmly. "I'm just repeating a stupid rumor. That's the story going round. That the Dynamic people are holding back on the merger because they're uneasy about Howard Durward as a person and as an individual and they want to do some further checking before they turn over their firm in exchange for a pack of shares in a corporation Durward dominates."

Durward nodded slowly. "Well, yes, I'd imagine they would want to be careful," he said. "There was that case just the other year, the aggressive young fellow who was buying up department stores right and left, you know — "

"Martin Stewart," Martlett offered.

"Yes. he's the one. Puffed the shares of his company up to four or five guineas through canny public relations, went about buying other firms. and then when it was discovered he had a background of postal fraud

the whole bubble burst. Some people lost millions on that one. I shouldn't be surprised if the Dynamic people have the same kind of fears in mind about me."

"But of course the situation's not the same at all," Martlett said. "You're as sound and as stable as anyone I know, Durward."

"You know that," Durward said. "But does everyone?" He shrugged. "Well, let them investigate, if that's what they want. I have nothing to hide. Nothing whatever, sad to say. I'm clean as a whistle."

Laughton deftly steered the conversation away from business, which bored him. He talked of a forthcoming racing meeting, he talked of a weekend outing he was making to Cornwall in company with a charming young lady who, he was certain, would yield up her maidenhood or equivalent thereof to him before Saturday, he talked of a possible jaunt over to Nice. He suggested Durward accompany him to the Riviera, repeating his assertion that he could use a few weeks of peace and quiet.

"After the merger, perhaps," Durward said.

But he was inwardly preoccupied, worrying over what Martlett had said. Martlett had tactfully cushioned the topic by insisting that it was a wild rumor believed in by nobody with any sense. But Durward knew otherwise. He had heard people comparing him to that rascal Martin Stewart before.

Unjustly, of course. Stewart had been little other than a thief, while Durward ran an honest if aggressive operation. All the same, a board of directors might well be uneasy about turning over their company to a man of possibly tarnished reputation.

All they need, he thought, *is to find out that I'm*

keeping company with a Soho stripper, and it'll be the end of the merger overnight. And shares in my company will drop forty percent in a week. It'll be a panic. It'll be sheer catastrophe.

Grimly, he pushed his inner fears into the back of his mind and tried to forget about them. His infatuation with Julie, he realized, was so powerful that it came ahead of all logical action.

I must be very careful, he told himself. *I'll only see her two or three times. Just enough to get her out of my system. It wouldn't do to wreck the whole enterprise just on the account of a single blonde stripper, would it?*

CHAPTER FOUR

THE EVENING TICKED AWAY with agonizing slowness. About eleven, Laughton grew restless and left, saying he was going to pick up a tart for an evening's amusement. He invited Durward and Martlett to join him, but they declined.

The two men remained together for a while, saying little. Durward sipped sherry and half-closed his eyes, relaxing as best he could. He enjoyed Martlett's company whether or not they held conversation. Martlett was a solid man, an honorable man, a man of the old-fashioned virtues. An Eton man, an Oxford man, who had distinguished himself in the war and now disting-

uished himself on the floor of the Stock Exchange. He was, thought Durward, a man without inner conflicts, a man of the most exquisite serenity and steadfastness of purpose.

About half past eleven Martlett said, "I think I'll turn in. Shall I give you a lift home, Durward?"

Durward shook his head. "Think I'll be sitting up a little while later. I'm not sleepy yet."

"Restless, eh?"

"Rather."

"Don't let it get you, Durward." Martlett said with a warm smile. "You'll succeed at that merger. I know you will. You mustn't pay attention to the whisperings of fools, never."

"Thanks, Martlett."

"Nothing at all. Good night," Martlett said.

"Good night."

Durward waited ten minutes after Martlett's departure, fiercely impatient all the while. Finally, having counted off the ten minutes, he sprang up and left the club in a hurry. The streets were quiet as he strode at an unfettered pace down Shaftesbury and up into Wardour. There was no need for this hurry, he told himself; he'd get to the Merriment far too early. But he could not hold himself back.

A block from the club, a tart stepped from a doorway. She was no more than eighteen, her pale white platinum hair done up in an immense puff, her breasts jutting alarmingly from her tight cashmere sweater. She jostled up against him, rubbing her breasts into him, and said in a broad Stepney accent, "How's about a bit of fun, gov'nor?"

"Excuse me."

"Fifty shillings buys you half an hour, guv'."

"Not interested," Durward said. He parried the girl's hand as she reached down to give him an obscene caress, pushed her gently out of his way, and kept on walking. His lips tightened in disgust. What was he turning into, to be walking on such a street as this at such an hour? He belonged across town on Park Lane, in the genteel refinements of the West End. Not here. Not on this street where teen-age whores could jam their oversized breasts into you, where sullen ponces lurked with switch-blade knives across the street to make certain you didn't harm their girlies.

He reached the Merriment. It was ten of twelve. The box office had closed, but the uniformed guard was still on duty in the lobby.

"Yeah?" he said.

"I'm a member. And a friend of Mr. D'amato's. I'm supposed to meet someone backstage."

"What's your name? Let's see your card."

Durward showed it. Damn this business, he thought. In no time at all literally dozens of people would know that Howard Durward was mixed up with a stripper.

"I'll check," the guard said. He ducked inside, returned a moment later, said, "It's okay. You can go in. Go straight backstage if you'd like."

Durward entered. He ascended the stairs to the lounge and peeked into the auditorium. He caught a glimpse of the stage. The grand finale was under way, with the naked chorus line stomping around wildly while two of the star strippers writhed in mock orgasms at the front of the stage. He found the door to backstage and went down the corridor to Julie's dressing-room.

He knocked. "Julie?"

"That you, Howard?"

"Yes." He opened the door. She was wearing street clothes, and sat at her dressing-table holding her French novel. He noticed that she had read her way nearly through the entirely book during the course of the evening. She put a marker in the book and smiled up gaily at him.

"Been a long evening for you, hasn't it?" she asked.

"Rather."

"Where'd you go?"

"To my club. Over on Shaftesbury Avenue. Sat around for hours and hours sipping sherry and waiting for midnight to come around."

"I've had a dull time of it too," she said. "Twenty minutes on stage, hours and hours of reading."

"I thought you liked to read," he said.

"Not when I've better things to do."

He looked at his watch. Almost midnight. "How soon before we can leave?"

"Not long," she said.

"It's a ridiculous business, making you sit around for hours just to take a foolish curtain call."

She shrugged. "It's in my contract. I get paid well enough so I don't really mind. The idea is that if some of the girls get sick during the evening, there'll be replacements backstage to do an extra number or two."

There was a knock on the door. A voice from outside called, "On stage, Miss Kent."

She grinned. "Wait here, Howard. It'll be but a moment."

She was gone, leaving him alone in the dressing-room. He heard applause on stage, and he wandered out

into the corridor. From where he stood, he had a slanting view of the rear of the stage, and he could see the pink, dimpled buttocks of half a dozen chorus girls jutting saucily toward him. The curtain-calls were over quickly enough, and a flood of naked and near-naked girls descended from the stage and swarmed past him Only a few of the girls were in street clothes; the rest had had to be nude for the finale, and would now be later than the others in leaving the club.

Julie said, "Let me get my jacket and my book. Be right with you."

"No hurry," Durward said.

He stood in the corridor, fascinated in a weird way by the nudity all around him in such quantity, feeling vaguely like a sultan in his harem — or rather, he amended it, like a eunuch standing guard, since the girls took no notice of him whatever. Julie reappeared in a couple of moments. Wearing her jacket, and with a tiny triangular hat perched jauntily on her golden head, she looked like a pretty shopgirl or secretary nothing more exotic than that. She flashed a brilliant smile and said, "Shall we go?"

"Fine."

"This way," she said.

She took him to a stage entrance that led down a winding iron staircase to a back-alley, and thence to the street. They emerged around the corner from the Merriment Club. It was a simple enough device for keeping the strippers out of the clutches of the clientele after the show. Durward thought.

"What kind of place is it we're going to?" Julie asked.

"Just an ordinary skiffle club."

"Funny." she said. "I wouldn't think someone like you would go in for skiffle. You seem so — well, respectable is the word. A top person, you know? The kind who reads the *Times* every day and votes Conservative and sees the right people at his club — "

"I do all those things," Durward said. "And I still like skiffle. What does that make me?"

"Unusual, I guess."

"I like strippers too," he said. He laughed. "No, that isn't really accurate. Last night was the first night I'd ever been in a Soho strip place."

"How come?"

"I guess I thought they were all sordid greasy little places," he said. "Someone talked me into visiting the Merriment last night and I saw how wrong I was."

"Do you regret having come?" she asked.

"Not at all," he said. "Not at all."

He hailed a cab and they rode to the skiffle place on Fleet Street near Ludgate Circus. Durward had been to it twice before, and hardly could say he was a regular there. That was one reason why he had chosen it. It was the sort of place frequented largely by a teen-age and low-twenties crowd, so it was more than unlikely that he would meet anyone apt to know him there. It just wasn't the sort of place that Top People went to. Durward's younger brother, on leave from military service for a few weeks, had dragged him to the place twice some months earlier. He had salted it away in his memory as a possible place for just clandestine outings like this.

They entered. It was a subterranean cellar, stucco-walled and narrow, badly lit and murky, creamed to the

last inch with tables. "Lord knows what would happen if there were ever a fire down here," he muttered. "There'd be a stampede to end all stampedes."

There were a couple of empty tables in the back, rather far from the band. Durward and Julie threaded their way through the tight-packed tables to the rear and sat down. Most of the patrons, Durward saw, were young couples, some of them out on the floor and dancing in the wild gyrations that passed for contemporary ballroom technique, the rest nestling together at their tables, holding hands and playing footsie out of sight.

Durward ordered beer for himself, espresso for Julie. She looked straight at him, her eyes wide, blue, and wonderfully innocent, and said, "Do you think it's wise to be seen with someone like me, Howard?"

"Wise? What do you mean?"

"You don't need to be coy. You're an important industrialist, and I'm a stripper. The City can be terribly stuffy. You have a reputation to maintain. And as for me — well, I have a reputation ready-made for me. Deserved or not. Nobody bothers to find out what a stripper's like. She's a stripper, that's all, and she's written off immediately as worthless."

"Shall I be honest?" he said.

"Of course."

"It's a risky business, my seeing you. That's why I brought you to a place like this. I couldn't very well take you to my club, you know."

"I know that. Then why risk it?"

"Because I can't help myself," he said simply. "The moment I saw you up there last night, something happened to me. Something that's made me terribly reckless, I'm afraid. And something that's made me feel ten

years younger."

"Howard, it would be horrid if something happened to you because of your seeing me."

"Let me worry about that," he said. He gulped down his beer vehemently. "Let's not start off talking this way, Julie. Your name *is* Julie, isn't it?"

"Yes. Julie Kent. That's how I was born."

"You don't mind using your own name on stage?"

"Why not? My parents are dead. There's no one I'll shock."

"Where are you from?" he said.

"Leeds. Lived there all my life, till I was eighteen. Came to London then."

"To be a stripper?"

She shrugged. "Of course not. I came here to have a career. In publishing, I think. I wanted to be a magazine editor. Well, I got nowhere. Hadn't even been to college, of course. So I had to take other jobs. I worked in Selfridge's for a while, in the glassware department. Ten pounds a week, and horrible old men pinching my rear every time I turned around. I did a stint as a typist. And other little stupid jobs. At night, I took courses in literature and the arts. A regular busy beaver. It went on that way for nearly a year and a half."

"And then?"

"And then, I met someone," she said, lowering her eyes demurely to the tabletop. "His name was David, and he was a writer, and he was working on a great novel and needed me to inspire him. So he said. I did my best. I inspired him so well I got pregnant. Which inspired him to leave the country. Last I heard he was living somewhere in Italy, still writing his novel."

"I'm sorry for you."

"Not half so sorry as I was for myself," she said. "Here I was alone in an unfriendly city, four months along nearly, and total savings of three hundred pounds. Not such a good position. I talked to someone who talked to someone who talked to someone. Presto, no pregnancy. Presto, I was fifty pounds in debt over and above my payments."

Durward studied her carefully. That took care of the virginity angle, of course. This girl had suffered. But the suffering seemed to have left no mark on her, outwardly. She had somehow retained the sunny innocent beauty of a choir-girl throughout her seduction, her abortion, and quite likely a number of other ugly experiences that she was simply editing out of her story.

He said. "So then someone else told you about the good money that could be made in stripping, is that it?"

"No, in prostitution," she said bluntly. "A girl I had met offered to show me the game. Set me up with her ponce, find a section of street for me, all the rest. I turned her down." Her cheeks reddened prettily "I'm no saint, mind you. There were other men before David — one or two — and a few since. But I was in love, each time. Honestly in love. I couldn't just sell myself to any foul-smelling man who came pawing at me. I couldn't. So I turned down the offer. Sex is too serious, with me. I wouldn't want to profane it by putting myself on the streets."

A modest stripper, he thought wonderingly. "What did you turn to, then?"

"Well, I needed some way to earn a living. To get myself out of debt. The debts were piling up. I couldn't just go back to office work at nine or ten quid a week, and I wasn't good enough for a real career. But I did

have one asset, I realized. One day when I was taking a bath, I looked at myself in the mirror. Maybe it sounds immodest, but I realized that I had a beautiful body. I don't see why I need to apologize for it. I just grew up that way. And around this time, you know, the strip clubs were opening up. The way it looked to me, it was the next thing to prostitution in those clubs, but then I talked to this girl who used to work at the Merriment — she's married now, has a lovely little baby — and she told me about Mr. D'amato and the way he ran his club. I went to see him, and he was sympathetic. So I became a stripper."

"You don't find the work embarrassing?"

"Oh, it was at first," Julie said. "I was half potted the first night I went on. But it wears off. It gets so you don't even believe the audience is there. And even if they are, what of it? You're naked. But we're naked all the time, under our clothes, aren't we?"

"That's a novel way of putting it," Durward said wryly.

"But it's so. You look at me and you know I have breasts, you know I've got buttocks, hips, all the rest. You can even pretty well guess what they look like. So why all the nonsense? Girls appear on the beach in tiny bits of cloth that hardly hide a thing. So if men are silly enough to pay admission to a place like the Merriment, and if the Merriment can do well enough to afford to pay me sixty pounds a week to take my clothes off, why not?" Why all the fuss and preteness?" She chuckled. "Of course, that doesn't mean I'm promiscuous. I've got everything well compartmentalized. Sex and stripping in public are kept separate."

"I noticed that," Durward said. "When I came

to your dressing-room. You automatically pulled your gown closed — quite forgetting that I'd already seen everything you had to hide."

"Of course. Because one was on stage, where I blank out my inhibitions. And the other was in private with a strange man. You see? I'm complicated."

"So I'm discovering," Durward said. "But complicated in a charming way." He leaned back, unwinding now. "Tell me about this D'amato. Is he on the level?"

"Oh, very much so. He's such a sweet fellow. Like a father to us all."

"So I gathered. But I suspected it might be an act he was putting on."

"Not at all. He's the funniest sort. He's made nearly a million pounds out of the club since it opened, but he still lives in a little flat on the Bayswater Road, still is married to the same woman he married thirty years ago, still takes his holidays in dumpy little hotels at Brighton — "

"Incredible."

"Yes, he is. Not the kind of greedy, grasping fellow most of the club proprietors are. Some of them, you know, they'll pimp for their girls as well as put them on display. Not D'amato. He advises us. He looks out for us like a mother hen. He gets us out of trouble. He never *never* makes passes at us, and you know we run around naked backstage all the time. He's just wonderful."

"A saint for our times," Durward said in a wondering voice. "The strip-club owner with a heart of gold. If I were a writer, I'd do a job on him for some big magazine. The Most Unusual Character I know, or something.

You're lucky to work for him, then."

"I know," she said. "But let's talk about you, for a while. I know you're a terribly important businessman, but that's all."

"My life's extremely dull," Durward said. "Nothing but the making of money, money, money. A lucky break in a business opening ten years ago, and an alarming number of pounds and shillings since then. Let's leave it at that and listen to the music, shall we?"

She accepted the evasion in good grace, and they turned their attention to the players. Like all skiffle groups, these fellows made up in energy for what they lacked in technical skill, and Durward admired the way they beat, strummed, plucked, and banged their bizarrely improvised instruments to produce almost origiastic-sounding pseudo-jazz. He let himself be caught up in the wild rhythms, the pulsating beat.

Finally he said impulsively, "Would you like to dance, Julie?"

"I'd love it."

He felt madly out of place on the crowded floor with teen-agers all around. But they seemed to cheer the old fellow on, and he responded gaily. *What the deuce,* he told himself. *I'm only thirty-six. Not yet ready for an old-age pension.* He propelled Julie around the floor with an abandon that astonished himself. She danced wonderfully well. Finally, panting and perspired, he pulled her from the floor and got a spontaneous round of applause.

"Fun," he gasped. "Not in shape for that kind of lunacy any more. But fun all the same."

"I'm having a wonderful evening, Howard."

So was he, he had to admit. He was in the company

of a dazzling beautiful girl, and he had left the business world far behind. Down here in this basement no one would recognize him. These light-hearted youngsters would sooner go for a month on black bread and water than read the financial pages, so his identity was safe. Nor would they recognize Julie, since none of them could afford the luxury rates of the Merriment Club. They were incognito, then. And having a glorious time. He realized how narrow and constructed he had allowed his life to become, in the past few months. He had been living, eating, breathing, and sleeping takeover bids and nothing else.

At about quarter past two, though, he began to find the humid atmosphere of the skiffle club oppressive.

"Shall we leave?" he said "It's getting quite late."

"Whatever you say, Howard."

"I'll take you home," he said.

CHAPTER FIVE

SHE LIVED UP ON BAKER STREET not far from Marylebone Road, with Madame Tussaud's practically in her back yard. It was a quiet, moderately respectable neighborhood, in good repair, neither flamboyant nor slummy.

Durward had reason to wish he had brought his car. At this hour in the morning, public transport had long since shut down, both the buses and the underground, and they had to walk nearly as far as Holborn before they found a cab. Even since he began to travel, Durward had taken unkindly to London's habit of shutting down tight this way at midnight. It was a provin-

cial way of doing things, compared with Paris, New York, or Rome.

But they did get a cab, finally, and by half past two they were in front of Julie's place. It was a newish building of flats, standing out in its modernistic rectangularity against the rounded Victorian brick houses all about.

There was an awkward moment in the downstairs hall, as Julie fumbled out her keys and looked at him hesitantly. Durward wondered to press the situation, or simply to smile and say goodnight. He wasn't sure what would be considered appropriate in cases like this. Julie might want to go out of her way to preserve her virtue, this time at least, in order to overcome prejudiced belief, so hard to shake, that strippers are easily seduced.

But no. She shook off her hesitation and said, "Would you like to come upstairs for a while?"

"I'd love it."

"I've got some rum, that's about all. Do you like to drink rum?"

"I'm fond of it," he said.

"It's practically my favorite drink," she told him, as they passed through the outer door.

She led him to the stairs. "There's a lift," she said, "but I never use it. I'm only on the second floor up, you see."

He followed her up the stairs. Glancing upward, he could see the play of her buttocks against the rear of her skirt as it tightened, and he remembered with sudden tension the creamy bareness of her on stage at six this evening, so many long hours ago. There was a knot in his stomach suddenly, and dryness in his throat.

They reached the landing. "Here we are," she said,

and opened a door.

They entered her flat.

It was small and simple, with the low ceiling and uncluttered architecture of post-war buildings. She had three rooms laid out around a central foyer: a sitting room, a bedroom, and a small kitchen. The furniture was inexpensive but tasteful, and there were a great many books in evidence, far more than he had ever dreamed to find in the apartment of a girl who worked in a strip house. Most of them, he noticed, were rather serious paperbacks on philosophy and the arts, with a sprinkling of the better novels. He was impressed.

There were some cheap prints on the wall -- Picasso, Miro, Leger. She switched on a small portable phonograph, saying, "My next-door neighbor is almost totally deaf. He doesn't mind my playing music at all Shall we have some?"

"Fine," he said.

She indicated the record rack. "Pick one and put it on while I'm finding the rum."

He studied the records. There were about thirty of them. Five or six jazz, a couple of calypso records, and -- again surprisingly — a good deal of classical chamber music. He picked out a Beethoven quartet and slipped it on. A moment later, Julie returned, holding a bottle.

"How do you like your rum?"

"How do you drink it?" he asked.

"Straight, usually. With a bit of ice."

"I'll have it that way too," he told her.

She prepared the drinks. He settled down on the couch, and she joined him, kicking off her shoes and tucking her feet up underneath. It was hard to believe

that this quiet, demure girl had pranced around in total nudity three times this evening at the Merriment. Now she seemed shy, sweet, almost virginal. He shut his eyes for an instant, recapturing the nudity, the bare breasts and shaven loins and the full buttocks waggling at the audience. Then he sipped the rum. It was strong and dark and good.

"Like it?" she asked.

"Very much."

"It's my favorite. It comes from British Guiana. Little store down near Leicester Square is the only place in London that stocks it." She leaned against the cushions, beating time to the ebb and flow of the music with her free hand.

He moved closer to her. "Julie — "

"Yes, Howard?"

"Julie, I — I wish I had the right sort of words for what I want to tell you. But I don't. I can't put it into words."

"What are you getting at, Howard?"

"That — that I felt very strongly attracted to you," he said lamely. "That I've been experiencing all sorts of strange emotions since I first saw you last night. That — oh, hell. How clumsy can a man get?"

She laughed playfully. "Poor Howard. You don't have any trouble talking to important company presidents, do you?"

"That's different."

"Oh, is it?"

"I think so."

"What do you want to tell me then?" She smiled. "You aren't trying to tell me that you're in love, by any chance, are you?"

"I might be."

"Then why not say it outright?"

"Because — because — " He shook his head. "It isn't right. We don't even know each other. Love means — dammit, love means a ripening, a feeling between two people who have knowledge of each other — "

"That's *your* definition," she said. "Can't love also mean a powerful sudden attraction? The striking of an immediate spark?"

"It isn't really love."

"Howard, Howard, why are you so dogmatic, so rigid, so — so narrow-minded?"

"It's the way I am," he said. "I'm a compulsive, I'm obsessed with my work, and I'm full of a lot of crazy ideas about the way people should behave to people."

"Suppose I said I love you," she murmured.

"You can't love me. You don't know me."

"I love what I've seen of you so far. I love you very much."

He shook his head broodingly. "Julie, we shouldn't be getting into tangles like this. It isn't possible for there to be anything between us. Not while I'm in my position — and you in yours — "

"You're afraid of public opinion, is that it? You think it'll be bad business to have the world find out you're in love with a Soho stripper?"

"No," he said tightly, almost in agony. "I don't give a copper-plated damn for the world's opinion. Except that I'm not a free agent. I can't just do as I please."

"Why not?" she asked.

He drew a deep breath. "I'm the head of a corporation, Julie. Durward Ventures, Ltd. There are nearly a million and a half shares outstanding at the

moment, plus a million more privately held by corporations we've taken over. Two and a half million shares, selling at about two guineas the share. I own about a hundred thousand of them personally. The rest are publicly owned. Are you following me?"

"Yes, but — "

"Now, suppose I get into a scandal. A really juicy scandal in the yellow newspapers. So juicy that it affects the future prospects of Durward Ventures, Ltd. Such a thing is possible. The company rises and falls largely on my personal reputation. If I destroy my reputation, it's almost the same as destroying the company. Mergers will fall through. The price of the stock will fall. Say something sensational happens. Share prices could drop fifteen shillings in a matter of weeks. I've seen it happen a lot more drastically than that. Look what happens to investors all over the country. The shopkeeper who's bought a hundred Durward shares loses seventy-five pounds of his investment. Heavier plungers are hurt much more severely. And all because I felt like having an affair."

"I see," Julie said gravely. "Then you really shouldn't have dated me tonight. Or come here."

"I know that."

"Then why did you?"

"Because I couldn't help myself."

"Why not?"

"Because I — I — " he hesitated.

"Go on. Because why? Say it, Howard."

"Because I love you," he got out finally, reddening

"All right, then. You love me and I love you. We've finally established that. And we can't be seen publicly. We've established that, too." Her eyes were solemn as

they bored into his. "Therefore we'll have to be clandestine. For as long as it lasts, we'll have to skulk around where we won't be observed. But I won't mind that, Howard. Will you?"

"If it's the only way I can see you, I guess we'll have to do it that way," he said.

"Yes. And — Howard — "

"Yes, Julie?"

"There's something I want to tell you."

"Go ahead."

"I don't want you to get the wrong ideas about me. I don't want you to think I'm easy, or anything like that. If you like, I'll tell you exactly how many men I've slept with, and I can count them on my fingers without needing my toes, either."

"What are you saying, Julie?"

"I'm saying that — that even though this is our first night together — even though I'm so terribly afraid of giving you the wrong ideas about me — of making you think I'm something I really am not — Howard, I want you to stay here with me tonight. All night."

"I'd love it."

"You won't think I'm forward, or easy, or anything?"

"I think I love you all the more."

"I love you so much, Howard!"

"How do things happen so fast?" he asked.

"They just happen, that's all," she said with a little laugh. "Don't question them. Just accept it. When happiness comes along, take it. Without asking questions P-put your arms around me, Howard."

Durward needed no further encouragement. He

slid his arm around her and drew her close to him, and then she was tight against him, his lips seeking hers. Her mouth was soft and moist and warm against his, and he probed and felt the tip of her tongue like some live thing lurking in the cavern of her mouth, and her fingers tightened on his shoulders and he could feel the ripe mounds of her breasts flattening against his chest, and then they stretched out on the couch, belly to belly, thighs to thighs, gripping each other tight in a paroxysm of passion.

He began to undress her. He insisted on doing it for her, as though if she took her own clothes off it would be too sharp a reminder of what she did every night before an audience of two hundred.

Sitting on the edge of the couch, he unbuttoned her blouse carefully, and she sat up to let him take it from her. He draped it over the back of a nearby chair and returned to his task, solemnly opening the button at the waist of her skirt, finding the zipper-pull that lay beneath a strip of cloth, drawing the zipper down. She arched her back upward and he slid the skirt down over her hips, and she smiled at him out of loving, misty eyes.

Then the slip, up over her head, and then he unclipped her garters with fastidious care, glorying in the touch of her soft warm thighs against his fingertips, and drew her stockings down.

"Careful, now," she said with a light grin. "Don't get them inside-out, now."

"I won't, don't fear."

"You seem very expert at this," she said.

"I've had long enough years of practice, Julie."

The stockings were off, now. He felt the pulsing thrill of suspense, as though he would see her body for

the first time in another few moments. She sat up again, and he maneuvered the hasps of her bra, and the cups fell away from the full creamy swells of her breasts, and he could smell the sweet fragrance of them as they expanded in their freedom, the red lines of confinement fading rapidly. The nipples were standing up stiffly already, straining upward.

She drew his head downward lovingly, and he kissed first one hard little nipple, then the other, and then deposited a kiss in the valley between her breasts steep hills of flesh rising against his cheeks. He could feel the irregular fluttering of her heart, and knew that she was tense, and it pleased him to know it; making love to a strange man was clearly no time-hardened routine for her, then.

Then, lifting his head, he sat up and slipped his hands under the waistband of her panties, and slipped them further in, until his fingers rested against the rounded soft cushions of her buttocks, and he began to draw the panties down. She cooperated, and they came off easily, and there she was naked but for the tight garter-belt at her hips, and that came off a moment later, and she lay nude on the couch, that strangely super-nude nakedness of hers, and he stroked the flat softness of her belly, and then he touched the soft flesh along the inside of her thighs.

"Now it's my turn to undress you," she said.

He let her undo his tie, open his shirt, peel away his clothing. She had some trouble with his belt, his trouser buttons. But within a few moments he stood naked before her, and she looked at him, and her eyes seemed to be shining with approval and desire and love.

She stood up, touching her body lightly to his. He

ran the tips of his fingers down her back, let them rest for a moment playfully in the little hollows just above where her buttock-cheeks curved out from the small of her back, then cupped the fullness of her buttocks.

"Let's go inside," she said in a whisper.

Hand in hand, they went to the bedroom. Long before he reached it, Durward was fiercely aroused, and he felt the dull throbbing and knew this was going to be memorable. She sprawled down on the bed, holding her arms outstretched to him just as she had done in his mental fantasy of the night before.

Then she laughed. "I feel so strange," she said.

"Why?"

"Being undressed for such a small audience."

"You've been in situation like this before."

"Not for a while," she said, coloring. "Not for quite while. I've been a good girl all year, Howard."

"Down with goodness, then."

"Yes. Down with goodness."

She drew him toward her, and they lay side by side, lips glued, hands roving, and he felt her beginning to breathe hard, felt her body stirring to his caresses, felt her coming alive in a wonderfully natural and uninhibited way, but still he delayed, not wanting to rush things, and only half believing that it was but some thirty hours since he had first set eyes on this girl at the Merriment Revue Club.

"Take me," she whispered urgently. "Now. Howard. Now!"

She tugged at his arms, and he rolled over, settling with her, and he heard her sigh at the moment when their bodies joined, and then she was moving beneath him, almost imperceptibly at first, then with greater

and greater intensity. Her breasts bobbed beneath him, pale and red-tipped, soft and yet firm, and he kissed them, bending sideways to do it, and she hugged him tight and arched her back to drive still deeper a wedge into herself, and he felt his feet dangling over the end of her bed and concentrated on what he must look like, so comical a figure, keeping his mind on his dangling feet to distract himself from the tingling pleasure, for he did not want to bring the lovemaking to a rapid end.

Now she was gasping and he felt the first spasms of fulfillment in her. He clenched his teeth and held tight while she moaned beneath him, and he felt the delicious quivering, and the spasm passed and she opened her eyes, a little surprised that he was still with her, and then she understood and smiled and closed her eyes again and began to move once more.

In a few moments she was quivering again, and this time Durward held nothing back.

"Yes, darling," she urged him. "Yes, yes, do it, as hard as you can, that's the way, yes, yes, yes, yes, yeeeees — "

It was a long outbreath that silenced her, and he shut his eyes tight and gave himself up to the frenzy that swept over him, letting the hammering blows slam through his entire frame, and she continued quivering until it was all over, and, tired, he lowered his head to her breasts.

She stroked his cheeks, his arms, his shoulders.

"I love you," she whispered.

His voice was hoarse as he said, "I love you."

"Was it — good for you?" she asked, almost timidly.

"Very very good."

"It was good for me, too, Howard."

"I know. I could tell."

"Men like it when a woman responds, don't they?"

"Of course they do. It's the most wonderful part of the whole experience, really."

"I never could respond to David. Maybe that should have been the tip-off to him. He was always so quick — never gave me a chance to enjoy it. But I loved him so much I didn't really mind. Until he made me pregnant and deserted me."

"Let's not talk about him, Julie."

"Does it bother you? Talking about the other men I slept with?"

He smiled and kissed a puckered nipple. "Not really. But why bother about what's dead and gone?"

"I suppose. Howard, suppose I got pregnant as a result of — of tonight. Would you take care of me?"

"Of course."

"Would you get me an operation?"

"No, silly. I'd marry you," he said, more than half jokingly.

"Do you mean that?"

He blinked in surprise at what he had said. "I — I don't know."

"That would look fine in the *Times*, wouldn't it?" she said gaily. "Howard Durward, financier, to marry Julie Kent. Miss Kent can be seen three times nightly at the Merriment Revue Club. She will shortly retire from the public stage owing to a bad case of pregnancy."

"Julie!"

"Well, be serious for a moment, then. You couldn't dream of marrying me. It would blight your career permanently. Besides, you don't even know me. Maybe

you wouldn't like me."

"I love you," he said.

"Like and love aren't the same thing, though. You can be all full of passion and infatuation, and still not like me as a person. Don't you agree?"

"Perhaps," he said. "But things like that don't show up till later."

"Yes," she said. "Not till after people are tied down in marriage. That's the hell of it."

"Let's not talk about gloom, Julie. Kiss me."

"All right."

"Now again. Once more, with feeling."

She did. She put everything she had into it. A bit to his surprise, Durward found the kiss developing into something a good deal more involved. Once again their bodies merged; this time, lying face to face, they made love in a tranquil way, like old hands this time.

When it was over, again to their mutual pleasure, they lay back, smiling, utterly relaxed.

"What time is it?" she asked.

His wristwatch was his only garment. "Almost four-thirty in the morning."

"And what time do you go to your office?"

"I'm there at nine," he said.

"But you won't have slept!"

"Better to stay awake all night than to get only a few hours' sleep," he said. "Are you tired?"

"A bit."

"Sleep, then. I'll leave. I'll go home, freshen up, have a pot of coffee, and go to the office. And catch up on my sleep some other time."

"Poor Howard. I can sleep till four in the afternoon, if I want to. Not that I ever do. When will I see you

again?"

"Tomorrow night. I'd say."

"Good. Will you come to the late show? You could see my act again. and then have some drinks in the bar, and go backstage at midnight and we'd leave together. Is that all right?"

"That would be splendid," he said.

CHAPTER SIX

SHE CURLED AGAINST HER PILLOW, and almost immediately was asleep. Durward stood over her a moment, looking down in wonder at her nakedness. She was drawn up like a child, like a sleeping kitten. What a wonderful mixture of abandon and innocence she was, he thought. What a completely original and fascinating girl, too. He realized he was guilty of thinking in absolutes. It had never occurred to him that a girl who earned her living as a stripper could be anything other than shameless in all aspects of life.

But not Julie. Somehow she had remained modest, even pure-hearted away from her work. And some of

that purity showed as she performed. It was the secret of her great appeal on stage, after all - she was *not* shameless, but a rather modest and pretty girl consenting to undress against her better judgement, and the audiences ate it up.

Drawing the coverlet up over her as she slept, Durward tiptoed out of the room. His clothing and hers was scattered all over the sitting-room. He dressed quickly, picked up her underthings and put them on the couch, shut off the phonograph, and dutifully carried their rum glasses into the kitchen. Then he left, closing the door carefully behind him.

It was nearly dawn. There were no cabs in sight of course. Finding one would be a bit of a problem, but he hardly cared. He walked west along Marylebone Street, coming to the point where it met the Edgeware Road and turned South. He walked for fifteen minutes through the pre-dawn mist, seeing no one but a bored-looking Bobby, and was practically down to Marble Arch before he caught sight of his first taxi.

With home another ten-minute walk away there was no point in taking a cab. He kept on going as daylight trickled into the sky, down Park Lane past the banks and the homes and the majestic bulk of the Grosvenor House hotel, and then he was home.

It was close to six in the morning. He hadn't been up through the night in two or three years, and he felt a faint throbbing behind his temples, but he knew he could run the course. A cold shower and a good mug of coffee and he'd be all right Silently, he entered his flat

He left for his office at quarter past eight, his usual time. He felt wide awake, but somewhat on edge. His

breakfast had consisted mostly of coffee, and he knew he was going to need a nap somewhere during the course of the afternoon if he hoped to last till midnight and his date with Julie. He hoped nothing too complex would come up during the day. He wasn't too sure just how clear his brain really would be in the event of anything complex.

His office was in a shiny new green-glass office building on the eighth floor, on Leadenhall Street within hailing distance of the Stock Exchange and the Bank of England. Durward Ventures had a suite of considerable size, but Durward had a side entrance that took him into his private office without having to pass before an assortment of secretaries, clerks, and staff members. It was just as well, he thought, considering the state of his health this morning.

He was at his desk just past nine. According to his memo pad, he was lunching with Sir Ronald Walters, Chairman of the Board of Dynamic Automation, Ltd.

But that appointment was snuffed out rapidly. It was only half past nine, and Durward was still working his way through the routine morning messages with a rapidly growing headache, when his interphone buzzed and his secretary said, "There's a call from Sir Ronald Walters for you, Mr. Durward."

"Put him on, will you?"

"Morning, Durward," Sir Ronald said. "Tried to reach you last evening about six, but you had gone."

"I keep modest hours, Sir Ronald," Durward said. He didn't care much for Walters, a baronet with considerable wealth and methodical, crisp ways. Sir Ronald had once been a research scientist, before organizing the automation firm he now headed.

"Well, can't expect a man to work round the clock I suppose," Sir Ronald conceded. "But – well, look here, Durward. I know we're due for lunch today, but d'ye think you could conceivably let me off?"

Durward felt a cold stab of apprehension. "Well, of course, Sir Ronald, if some other commitment has come up — "

"Matter of fact there has, Durward. A damned nuisance, but I've got to inspect a power station in Devon. Calling me in as a consultant, you understand. Everyone quite insistent. Helicopter all ready to take me out there soon as I'm finished talking with you. I do hope you'll forgive me."

"A man has his duty to his country, Sir Ronald," Durward said with a heartiness he was far from feeling. "Of course, the consulting work comes first. We can reschedule our luncheon for tomorrow, after all."

"Afraid that's deucedly difficult, Durward."

"Oh?"

"You see, tomorrow's Saturday."

"Oh. Yes. Of course. Silly of me to forget that."

"I'll be away for the weekend, I rather imagine. Be back Sunday night. But I've already committed myself for luncheon on Monday and Tuesday. Shall we make it for Wednesday, then, Durward?"

"I don't see what other alternative there is," Durward said.

"Fine, then, Wednesday at noon. Be looking forward to seeing you then, Durward."

Durward put down the phone leadenly. The conversation had troubled him. He and Sir Ronald were supposed to meet to iron out the final details of the merger agreement. A good many people knew about this

luncheon.

Now, it was just possible that the Devon trip was genuine though he was skeptical. Sir Ronald was an important man, and this was an important conference, and no one could push him into going off to Devon on a day's notice if he didn't want to go. On the other hand, he could always create just such a situation if he had a responsibility in London that he was eager to escape.

And another thing. What was this deal about being busy on Monday and Tuesday? The merger was important, Durward reasoned. It should take top priority over other commitments. There was only one explanation.

Sir Ronald was stalling.

Stalling for what? Time to investigate, to sniff out more facts about the man who was taking over the Dynamic Automation company? Was that it.

Damn them, what do they expect to find?

He didn't like the setup. The merger had seemed all but in the bag a week ago. Now, it was starting to show ominous signs of delay. If this was some kind of tactic designed to pressure him into raising his bid, he told himself, he wasn't going to fall for it. What was going on?

Well, there was no use letting perfectly good luncheon reservations go to waste, at any rate. He buzzed his secretary and said, "Ring up Mr. Percival Laughton for me, like a good girl."

She buzzed back a few minutes later. Laughton was on the phone.

"Morning, Puddy. I didn't wake you up, did I?"

"Not precisely, Howard. What's troubling you?"

"It happens that my partner on a luncheon en-

gagement has just backed out. Here I sit with a table reserved at Pierre's, and I'm damned if I'll eat there alone. Feel like blowing yourself to a free feed?"

"I'd love to, Howard. But it just can't be done."

"May I ask why?"

"Because if I eat with you at Pierre's, it'll go on all afternoon, I simply know it. And Nancy and I are leaving for Cornwall at half past one."

"Damn. I forgot about that weekend outing of yours."

"Yes. So sorry. If you're really eager to lavish money on me, we can make it next week, though."

"It's a deal, Puddy. Well, have yourself a fine weekend, and don't be too lecherous with that poor frightened virgin of yours."

"She's no virgin, Howard."

"Maybe. It's a sure bet she won't be one come Sunday, anyway."

"Oh — Howard?"

"Yes?"

"I hear you're going great guns with that blonde-haired lass from the Merriment. My congratulations. Didn't know you had it in you."

Durward felt as though an iron-hard icicle had just been rammed through his vitals. "What are you saying, Puddy?"

"Well, I hear you picked up La Kent after the late show at the club last night, and spirited her off on your magic carpets. Was it a successful Durward Venture, Howard?"

"Puddy, where in blazes did you hear that?"

"Oh, I have spies here and there."

"Will you tell me where you heard it?" Durward

said, feeling on the verge of apoplexy.

"You really want to know."

"Yes. Really."

Laughton said, "I asked D'amato."

"When?"

"Last night. Oh, about ten after twelve, I'd say. You recall I left you in search of some fun. I didn't find any, and I thought it might be amusing to go over to the Merriment and see who was pickupable backstage. I had my eye particularly on the Kent morsel. But she was gone when I got there, and I ran into D'amato, and at first he wouldn't tell me where she was, but then I wangled the story out of him. Infatuated, eh? Well, I wish you all luck. I wound up with that Spanish-looking stripper, Lola whatever-it-is. Not bad. Quite torrid. Never dreamed you'd — "

"Puddy, listen to me."

"Yes, Howard?"

"I don't want you to breathe a word of this to anyone. Not to *anyone*. Not a single soul. I'll — I'll castrate you if you do, you hear me?"

"Would I go blabbing, now?"

"I'm deadly serious. That old fool D'amato had no business telling you, and it's got to end with you. I can't have this sort of thing going around town. True or untrue."

"Well, all right — "

"I mean it. It could ruin me, Puddy."

"I'll keep shut. You can count on it."

"Not to anyone. Not to Birrell, not to Martlett, not to your valet, not to anyone."

"Mum's the word, Howard. I swear it."

"All right," Durward said.

His hand trembled as he put the receiver down. If D'amato had told Laughton. D'amato might tell anyone

Anyone.

And Sir Ronald snooping around, trying to find reasons for not selling his company out to Durward Ventures.

A fine mess, Durward thought. All because of his crazy infatuation with —

With a fine girl, he told himself.

Was it worth risking destruction to go on sleeping with Julie Kent, he wondered? It had been sheer madness to think that he could keep the affair a secret. Madness. Probably fifty people knew of it already. Tomorrow, a hundred. Next week, a thousand. And then it would explode into the tabloids and eight million Londoners would be talking about Howard Durward and his love affair with a Soho stripper, and he'd be in a fine position then, with all the proper proper people of the financial world turning against him and selling short thousands of shares of Durward Ventures as their way of rebuking him for his transgression against the proper proper code of morality of the Establishment.

Durward scowled. Who gave a damn about the Establishment and its code of authority, anyway? He hadn't been born into it. His father had been a shopkeeper, not a duke. He hadn't gone to the right schools. He hadn't even been to one of the wrong colleges, let alone one of the two Establishment ones. He had money, and he had manners, and so he passed as an Establishment man, but it was all superficial, all on the outside. He wasn't really part of the aristocracy. He had made his way in by sheer personal dynamism rather than inheritance.

And now they were trying to dictate morality to him, he thought angrily.

He shook his head and returned to the morning's work. He made a mental note to have a word or two with Mr. Lucien D'amato about respecting confidences, a little later along in the day.

Paul Martlett phoned him shortly after eleven. The stock market had opened by that time, and Martlett usually contacted Durward at least once before lunch to let him know how things were going at the Exchange.

Martlett sounded worried this morning. "I don't like the way things are shaping up here, Durward."

"In what way? Is the market off?"

"The index is down a fraction or so," Martlett said. "But it's Durward Ventures I'm worried about."

There was tightness in Durward's belly. "Why?"

"Behaving peculiarly. It opened at forty and sixpence — that's slightly above yesterday's close — and almost at once a block of a thousand shares knocked it down to forty and one. Then it started rising again, reached forty and eight pence this time, and another big block came across — four thousand shares. It's trading at just under forty shillings now. That's down better than two shillings from Wednesday's close."

"What of it?" Durward said tensely. "We had a big rise from thirty-three, didn't we? This is just a natural consolidation."

"The consolidation's already taken place around forty-two," Martlett said. "With an important merger in the offing, the stock should be well on its way to forty-five this morning. Instead large shareholders seem to be dumping their holdings. I don't like it, Durward."

"Are there any rumors going around?"

"Yes," Martlett said. "They're whispering that the merger talks between you and Dynamic Automation have been called off. If it snowballs, Durward, we could see a five or six shilling drop in the stock."

Durward sighed. "Very well. I categorically deny the rumor, and you can let it be known that I'll have a detailed explanation for the financial press at — oh, say, quarter past twelve this afternoon."

Martlett rang off. Durward buzzed for his secretary and dictated a brief press statement to the effect that merger negotiations between Durward Ventures Ltd. and Dynamic Automation Ltd. were still very much alive, unfounded rumors to the contrary, and that perhaps such rumors had originated in reports that a luncheon date between Howard Durward and Sir Ronald Walters had been called off. "The meeting has not been cancelled but simply postponed till next Wednesday," Durward dictated. "The postponement was unavoidable in view of Sir Ronald's suddenly being called to Devon as consulting engineer in a power-station difficulty that arose on short notice. Got all that?"

"Yes, Mr. Durward."

"Good. Type it up and bring it in here for my approval. Then ring up the usual financial press people and have them send runners over here to pick up the statement."

The announcement seemed to have some effect. Martlett phoned back at two o'clock to tell him that buying in Durward had picked up considerably since the release had gone into circulation, and that in a brisk rally the shares had moved up to forty-one shillings sixpence, wiping out virtually all the losses that

had been sustained in the stock's market weakness of the past few days.

Well, Durward thought, the early flock of rumors had been contradicted and their effects nullified. So far so good. He was far from eager to see a sharp break in the shares of his own corporation. A really steep decline would jeopardize the Dynamic merger even more, since the value of the stock he was offering would have diminished — and that would send the stock down even further. It was a vicious cycle, once it got under way, and he was anxious to avoid it.

He paced his office, catching sight of himself in a mirrored reflection. He was startled by his drawn expression, by his bloodshot eyes. The tension was beginning to tell on him. One life-or-death deal after another, all winter, and this last one the stickiest of all.

And he wasn't out of trouble yet, he realized. True, the stock had recovered from its recent dip. But the dip had come on rumor alone. What if something more substantial got around.

What if Sir Ronald found out about the romance with Julie Kent?

What if that served as pretext for breaking off negotiations? Would the Dynamic people want to turn their company over to a horrid, vulgar young man who consorted with strippers? Oh, dear, no!

Durward clenched his fists. He thought of Julie, remembering the hours he had spent with her, remembering the warm musky smell of her naked body remembering the dry texture of the skin of her breasts against his lips, remembered the sheer ecstasy of merging his body with hers —

Give her up?

Break off completely?

Maybe put her in cold storage until this merger deal went through?

No, he thought. He couldn't do it. She filled his mind completely.

Which is more important, he asked himself?

Julie?

Or Sir Ronald Walters' moral qualms?

Julie, he thought. *Julie Julie Julie Julie.*

He put his hands to his head. The situation, he thought, would be almost comic, if it weren't so agonizing. Efficient, respectable, honorable young industrial titan falls in love with stripper. Hopelessly in love, he amended.

How long had it been since he had felt this way about a woman, he asked himself? Eight years? Ten?

There had been Ethel, he thought. The first girl he ever slept with. He was seventeen and gawky, she was nineteen and cow-like, with huge breasts and sagging buttocks and a simpering smile. He hadn't loved her — in fact, he had been rather repelled by her — but the magic of sex had held him, had kept him running to her for weeks at a time, forgetting all else.

And Pamela. He'd been twenty-one, then. She was twenty and they loved each other with a deep and abiding passion, and made love copiously in the basement of her Hammersmith home, and swore to marry the moment the war ended. But then he was called up and sent overseas, and when he returned she was married to her childhood sweetheart, and puffed up with her second pregnancy.

Harriet. That was 1946, he remembered. Black hair, small sweet breasts, agile loins.

Joanne. 1949. The baronet's daughter, that one.

None since. He'd steeled himself against falling in love for more than a decade. Affairs, yes. Companionship, yes. But from 1950 on, the real business of his life had been Durward Ventures, Ltd., and he had taken good care that no bit of bosomy fluff would come between him and his dedicated task of earning a million pounds.

But now you've got your million and plenty more, you damned fool. And now you've met a girl — a very special girl — and you can't make your bleeding mind up what to do about her. Cast her aside to keep the pompous asses of the Establishment smiling? Or defy the world and follow the dictates of your heart?

Frowning, Durward recalled what had happened to King Edward the Eighth when *he* had tried to follow the dictates of his heart. *He lost a kingdom; I can only lose wealth and power. Is it worth it? I wish I knew.*

He felt gray and lifeless, drained of all energy. A formidable inertia snowed him under. He realized he was approaching a state of physical exhaustion.

He rang up his secretary. "Miss Parks, I'm going to take a little rest. For exactly an hour and a quarter. Will you see to it that I'm not disturbed?"

"Of course, Mr. Durward."

"That means I don't want to take calls from anyone. Not even Buckingham Palace. It's — ah — twelve minutes after two, now. I'd like you to ring me up at twenty-seven past three, and keep ringing till I answer."

"Yes, Mr. Durward."

He kept a specially oversized couch in his office for times like these. Wearily, he kicked his shoes off and stretched out to his full elongated length. He felt as

though someone had been sandpapering his eyeballs. He let his lids droop closed. That felt good, he thought, so very good.

He dreamed of Julie. She was nude, standing on the stage at the Merriment Revue Club going through her routine. But there was only one man in the audience, and that man was Howard Durward.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DURWARD WOKE RELUCTANTLY at the buzzing of the interphone. He checked his watch, saw that it was nearly half past three. It seemed incredible. He felt that no more than five minutes had passed since he had closed his eyes.

"Yes, yes. I'm awake, Miss Parkes. Thanks, yes."

He asked her to send a pot of coffee in, and began to take the backlog of calls and decisions that had piled up during his rest. He felt less fatigued than before, but not quite up to his usual level of performance. He was relieved when the afternoon came to its end, the phone ceased its angry jangle, and he could leave.

He took dinner at the club with Tom Birrell and Paul Martlett. Birrell was still worked up at the late session that had kept him yesterday.

"Those retired Majors," he said. "They should all be put out to pasture. I'd say. But instead they get themselves elected to Parliament."

"They represent the beliefs of their constituents, Tom," Martlett said. "People in the back country who firmly believe in flogging and in the natural superiority of the white race. They get the kind of representation they want and deserve."

"But then we have to put up with it," Birrell muttered. "Imagine, two and a half hours standing up there denouncing sin and iniquity. Soho the modern Babylon. It went on and on and on."

"Did it come to a vote?" Durward asked.

"Finally. Nearly midnight, by that time, and barely a quorum on hand. We buried the measure, of course. But Major Jarrell swears he'll carry on the noble fight."

"Here we go," Martlett said. "Picketing and petitions and all the rest. The suffragette routine all over again."

"It'll get nowhere," Birrell said. "The prevailing mood of the country these days is changing. Very few people seem to think the naked female body is inherently evil. There'll be an anti-Jarrell movement, mark my words."

Durward shook his head. "And all sorts of agitation and counter-agitation. Why can't these Jarrells leave other people alone? Why all the meddling?"

"Because they're sniggering bastards with twisted souls," Birrell said vehemently. "They can't bear to see other people enjoying the pleasures they don't share.

If they get hangovers from whiskey, they start prohibitionist movements. If they have confused sex lives, they agitate against prostitutes and strip shows."

"I should think, though, that if *Mrs.* Major Jarrell were frigid or anything like that," Durward said, "that the Major Jarrells would be glad to let prostitution flourish—if only for their own entertainment."

"It doesn't work that way," Martlett said. "They turn against the entire concept of pleasure. They lead bloody joyless lives themselves, and they're out to make certain everyone else does as well. Would you be good enough to pass the sherry, Durward?"

Durward remained at the Spartan Club for most of the evening, relaxing and occasionally sinking into a light dose. Martlett remarked on it.

"You're remarkably somnolent tonight, Durward. Been burning the candle at both ends, eh?"

Durward smiled faintly. "Tired, that's all. This blasted merger—"

"It's the weekend now," Birrell said. "Forget financial doings, boy. Listen, come away with me for some fishing, will you? We'll motor up to Cambridgeshire and see what we can do to the trout population tomorrow and Sunday. You too Martlett."

"Sounds like a splendid idea," the broker said. "What about it, Durward?"

"Sorry, gentlemen. I've got another engagement."

"Oh?" Birrell said. "An affair of the heart, is that the story?"

Durward felt himself reddening. "I'll plead personal privilege and say nothing. But I can't go away for the weekend with you. Sorry."

"Well, then, I'll go myself," Birrell said. "Are you

with me, Martlett?"

"I don't see why not, Birrell."

Durward left them at about ten that evening, while they were in the midst of planning their fishing expedition, and still trying playfully to find out what was so urgent as to keep him in London for the weekend.

He walked briskly up to the Merriment Revue Club. By now the walk up Wardour Street was old hat to him, and he barely noticed the sullen-faced lounging Teddy Boys, barely heard the obscene invitations of the clustered prostitutes lurking in each doorway. He reached the Merriment and entered, paying his guinea fee for the late show.

As he entered the lounge, he said, "Is Mr. D'amato on the premises?"

"Who would like to see him, please?"

"Mr. Durward."

"Just one moment, I'll see if he's free."

Durward settled down in a corner of the lounge. The second show of the night had just ended, and there would be half an hour's interval before the final show began. A waiter came over, and Durward ordered a brandy. He crossed his long legs and leaned back, watching the assemblage of prosperous-looking men all about him. He recognized a few, spotted two Members of Parliament that he knew and an important banker. But he was situated out of sight, and they did not notice him. Just as well. He was not keen on being found here.

A few moments passed, and then D'amato appeared, beaming broadly. "So good to see you again, Mr. Durward. An honor to our premises whenever—"

"Sit down, D'amato," Durward said curtly. "I've

got a bone to pick with you."

The pudgy proprietor's jovial expression faded in a moment. Looking worried and even a bit fearful, he pulled out the seat opposite Durward and sat, nervously chafing his soft pink hands together.

"Yes, Mr. Durward?"

"I thought I asked you to be absolutely discreet about my interest in Julie Kent. And here you've been blabbing it all over town."

"Begging your pardon, Mr. Durward, I must deny—"

"You deny what? You deny that you told Puddy Laughton about my seeing Julie?"

D'amato looked flustered. "I admit that was perhaps unfortunate."

"*Perhaps?* Look here, D'amato, when I told you I wanted no one to know, I meant no one. Now, why did you spill the story to Laughton?"

D'amato looked as though he wanted to burrow into the deep pile carpeting beneath him and vanish permanently from sight. Sheepishly he said, "It was an accident. He came here, you know, looking for Julie. I said she had gone. Then he asked if *you* had been here during the evening, and without thinking I said you had. Then immediately he put two and two together and came to the conclusion that you had taken her out. I tried to deny it, but—" D'amato shrugged, and some of his former cheer returned. "I am a very poor liar, Mr. Durward. Your friend Mr. Laughton saw right through me. So finally I had to admit the truth."

Durward scowled. He knew that Puddy, with his charm and his slyness, could weasel almost anything out of anyone. But, all the same, it was discomforting to

know that D'amato could be cajoled quite that easily.

Durward said, "Let me make it quite crystal clear to you, D'amato. I could be seriously compromised if certain people learned of my fondness for Julie. I could be hurt very badly indeed, and so could many innocent shareholders who are not asking for this sort of trouble. Do I need to spell it out for you?"

"I don't suppose so."

"Good. Then let's watch it from now on, D'amato. Puddy's a friend of mine, and no real harm's been done, except that the more persons who know about this, the more chance there is that trouble might result. Understand me? So from now on whenever anybody mentions my name and Julie Kent's in the same sentence, or even the same paragraph, change the subject quickly. I don't mean to browbeat you, D'amato. But I must get across to you the importance of keeping this quiet."

D'amato was sweaty and pale, now. He mopped at his forehead, smiled placatingly, and said. "I promise you, Mr. Durward. I promise with all my heart. I only wish I could take back what I said to Mr. Laughton."

"Forget that. Just don't let it happen again."

"I shan't. And can I buy you another brandy, Mr. Durward?"

Durward accepted the drink. D'amato seemed quite genuinely contrite over his indiscretion, apologizing over and over again until his fulsomeness became almost embarrassing. Durward was relieved when D'amato finally finished his drink and left the table, not without assuring Durward a few dozen more times that his faith would not be misplaced from this moment onward.

Durward sat alone again, cradling his snifter and taking an occasional sip of brandy. He glanced at his

watch. Twenty after ten. In another ten minutes, the doors of the auditorium would re-open, and in perhaps twenty minutes from then he would see Julie again.

Nude.

He felt a faint pang at that. It was one thing coming here last night, seeing her. But now they knew each other, they had been to bed together, they had even talked of love, and, in a roundabout, halting, semiserious way, of marriage. That night together altered things. Durward thought. How would he feel tonight, sitting here in his seat full of thoughts of love, watching Julie take off her clothes and finally stand nude while two hundred other men entertained thoughts of lust in the privacy of their skulls?

It was going to be decidedly uncomfortable. Durward thought.

See? he told himself. *You're an Establishment man at heart, after all. Full of bourgeois mentality. Now that you think you're in love, you want her all to yourself. You can't compartmentalize things in the same way she does. You're starting to think it's wicked for your own true beloved to show her body to others. Well, maybe it is. But she doesn't think so. How does she keep that innocence of hers from tarnishing, anyway?*

A thin, rasping voice coming from over his left shoulder cut abruptly into his meditations.

"Well, if it's not Howard Durward! What an odd place to be finding you!"

Frowning, Durward glanced up and was displeased to find himself looking at the thin, sallow face of Harold Finch-Starrett, author of the *Daily Dispatch's* heard-around-London gossip column under the byline of Peter Pry.

Durward knew Finch-Starrett all too well, both by his reputation as the most diligent and formidably efficient unearther of filth in Great Britian, and from occasional personal contact around town. But he adopted a standoffish attitude now, narrowing his eyes and saying, "It's Finch-Starrett, isn't it?"

"You haven't forgotten my face so soon, have you, Durward?"

"I see so many newsmen during the day," Durward said. "It's hard to remember all their faces. But I did get you right, after all."

"That you did. Mind if I talk with you a while, Durward?"

"If you've nothing better to do."

"I never have anything better to do than talk with Howard Durward." Finch-Starrett said greasily. The journalist pulled out the chair that D'amato had occupied a few moments before, and sat down. He smiled, revealing yellowish teeth and tugged at his straggly black mustache The odd thing about Finch-Starrett, Durward thought, was that he looked his part so thoroughly, with his sly eyes and narrow face and long chin and bad complexion. He *seemed* a nasty one, just at a glance. And further acquaintance proved that one's first impressions were, in this case at least, correct.

But it was bad business to offend Finch-Starrett gratuitously He wielded tremendous power in his daily column, and, in his vindictive way, he could make a good deal of trouble for anyone who pointedly snubbed him. Respecting and resenting his power simultaneously, Durward could hardly refuse to talk to him. Especially since Finch-Starrett had social connections, being the grandson of the Duke of Wilshire.

Finch-Starrett said, "May I ask what brings you to a place like this, Durward?"

"The quest for entertainment. What brings any man here, eh?"

"Some come because it's their professional duty." Finch-Starrett said. "Myself, for instance. I'm here at the urging of Major Claude Jarrell. Do you know him, Durward?"

"The one who introduced the anti-strip-club bill the other day?"

"That's the one. A regrettable wowser." Finch-Starrett said, with a confidential grin intended to win Durward over. "I find his views rather antiquated. But he is stirring up quite a fuss, you know."

"I rather imagine he is."

"And so I'm here," the newsman said. "Trying to find out if these places really are the dens of vice that the good Major told Parliament they are."

"And are they?" Durward said boredly.

"I'll reserve my judgment, if you don't mind. But it is a surprise to find such notables as Howard Durward in a place like this."

"I suppose you'll mention the fact in your next column?" Durward asked coldly.

"Wouldn't you want me to?"

"It wouldn't matter to me in the slightest," Durward said blandly. "No doubt your readership will think it's perfectly dreadful for a man in my station to be seen here. It's all right for *them* to come, when they can afford it, but for a Durward — oh, my, how shocking."

"Tabloid readers *are* puritans at heart," Finch-Starrett said. "At least where others are concerned. But let me ask you: have you been a member here long?"

"A day or so."

"And what impelled you to join? Surely the sight of naked ladies is no novelty to you?"

"I came out of curiosity, Finch-Starrett. A friend of mine who's in Parliament told me about Major Jarrell and his bill, and I thought I'd get a first-hand look and see what all the shouting was about."

"Could that friend in Parliament be Mr. Tom Birrell?" Finch-Starrett asked.

"The name doesn't matter," Durward said casually. "But I thought I'd look in. So I did."

"And how do you find the strip shows?"

"Entertaining," Durward said. "And now, if you'll excuse me—"

"Of course," Finch-Starrett said.

The doors to the auditorium had opened. Unwilling to spend more time than was absolutely necessary in the company of Finch-Starrett, Durward seized on that as an excuse to take his seat.

Of all the damnable nuisances, he thought. Well, so the weekend column of Peter Pry might carry word that none other than Howard Durward had been seen at the Merriment Revue Club Friday night. It was annoying, but not really serious. After all, there were plenty of other important financial and Parliamentary figures wandering around the Merriment tonight, and Peter Pry's list would include plenty of significant names. Which cancelled the whole thing out. You couldn't try to make a case against the whole entourage. Most likely, Finch-Starrett wouldn't bother mentioning any names. Mere attendance at a strip club wasn't likely to blacken anybody's reputation, except perhaps in the eyes of the more fanatical followers of Major Claude

Jarrell.

But, on the other hand, if Finch-Starrett took up the practice of snooping around here regularly, on the off chance that he would discover some illicit romance between the strip girls and the patrons, things could get very very nasty indeed.

Very nasty.

Then Finch-Starrett would have some highly juicy news to report. He would splash it across the pages of his muck-raking journal, and the results would be catastrophic. Durward could almost write the passage himself: "We've noticed industrialist Howard Durward lurking about Soho's Merriment Strip Club remarkably often these days, and now we know why. A lissome fair-haired peeler whose initials are J.K. is the special object of the Durward attentions. Having seen this particular lass's asset on display the other night, we can understand the bachelor financier's interest in her. A little flirtation is a fine thing, Mr. D. — but do you really think it's fitting for a man in your position to indulge himself this way?"

Something like that. Or even snottier, Durward thought. One thing was certain: now that Finch-Starrett had spotted him here, he was going to have to be more than circumspect about his actions. *And if that weakling D'amato lets himself get trapped again, there'll be hell to pay*, Durward thought gloomily. *It's too easy to get information out of him, I'm afraid.*

He settled down in his front-row seat. Others were trickling in, now. He caught sight of Finch-Starrett lurking about, engaging in a bit of conversation here, a bit of snooping there. Then the lights began to dim. The show was getting under way.

Same old overture. Same old M.C.'s remarks.

The build-up for Julie.

Then Julie appeared.

She looked radiant and glorious tonight, as though the ecstasies of last night had lingered in her soul. She glanced straight at Durward and smiled unmistakably at him.

He twisted uncomfortably in his seat.

Did Finch-Starrett notice that? he wondered. *And if he did, what did he make of it?*

Durward cautioned himself against being too suspicious of Finch-Starrett. The smile hadn't perhaps been as obviously directed at him as he thought. Maybe everyone down that entire file of seats was basking in the warmth of what he thought was a personal greeting.

Julie was singing, now. And stripping.

Garment after garment came off. Bra, panties, everything. She was nude, and Durward could hear the little indrawn sighs of lust all over the theatre, and he felt his own cheeks reddening as though it were his wife or his sister up there in the nude in public. Julie seemed to show no embarrassment as she moved around, crossing her legs, uncrossing them, showing her rear to the audience, doing little tricks with her breasts. Durward fidgeted, his own eyes fixed with leaden concentration on the contours of her body. There was a coppery taste of desire on his tongue.

Go on, he thought. *Stare at her, all of you! Make love to her in your minds. Daydream about what it's like to sleep with her. But none of you in this room will ever know, because this is as close as you'll ever come to her. Because she's mine, you hear that? Go on and drool, but she's still mine, and all you can do is look and dream*

and look some more.

Julie's act reached its finish. She skipped off stage, a lithe nude nymph, uninhibited and unfettered in her bareness. Durward followed her with his eyes until the last curving snip of buttock had vanished into the wings.

He realized he was drenched with perspiration.

He sat back, watching without interest the strictly anticlimactic acts that followed. He wanted to leave the auditorium, wanted to get backstage to Julie, but he didn't dare walk out. It would attract too much attention. Finch-Starrett had a fearfully agile mind, and if he started suspecting that Howard Durward had come here to see one act and one act alone, it wouldn't take long for him to smell out the rest of the story.

Durward sat.

He watched nudes big and nudes small, nudes lusty and nudes gusty, nudes bosomy and nudes flat. Half an hour ticked by. Durward decided he'd had about enough. He rose, making his way toward the door. A quick glance showed him Finch-Starrett, watching with rapt attention as though he was really fascinated by the sight of bare breasts and buttocks wandering around in such prolific quantities.

Making sure that nobody else had left the auditorium and could see where he was going, Durward headed for the door to the backstage corridor. The guard, recognizing him, smiled and let him go through.

Just as he reached Julie's door, one of the other solo strippers appeared — the one named Lola, the brunette with long hair and startlingly pointed breasts. She was totally nude, carrying a G-string in her hand. She brushed provocatively against Durward and said, "Allo there."

Durward nodded as politely as he could, under the circumstances of her total nudity. He saw the sweat-beads glistening on her big breasts.

"I am Lola. You are looking for me?"

"Sorry, no."

"Ah, you are looking for Julie! I should have remembaired. You were here last night."

Durward smiled uncomfortably at her and knocked at Julie's door as Lola moved on. Chalk up another one who knew what was going on, now. This affair was becoming about as private as though it were conducted in the middle of Trafalgar Square at noonday.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"WHO IS IT?" JULIE CALLED.

"Howard."

"Come in!"

He stepped within. She was seated at her dressing-table, again with a book in her hand. She wore only a dressing-gown, and she didn't bother to close it as she rose and came to him. He slipped his arm around her, feeling the warm globe of her bare breasts flattening against him as they embraced.

"I saw you out there," she said. "Did you see me smile at you?"

"Yes. I'll have to talk to you about that."

She frowned. "Why?"

"There's a filthy gossip-columnist out there Finch-Starrett, from the *Dispatch*."

"Oh. Howard, is there going to be trouble —about your seeing me?"

"I don't think he knows yet."

"But my smile may have given it away."

"I doubt it," Durward said. "But we've got to be more careful than we've been. He's obviously trying to dig up a juicy story about the Merriment, and what juicier one is there than this?"

"Howard, I'm afraid. This might all turn out to be so terribly disastrous for you."

"Stop worrying about it. We musn't be afraid of the Finch-Starretts. I can stay a step ahead of him."

"But always to be hiding this way — "

"Not always," Durward said.

"But you can't possibly ever admit that you're keeping company with — with a stripper. Howard!"

"Let's not worry about things like that now, Julie. Do you love me?"

"Of course I do."

"And I love you. That's what matters."

"Oh, Howard, why do things have to be like this? Why couldn't I be — a shopgirl, say? And you a salesman, or a writer, or something like that. Then we could be in love and nobody be concerned. We could walk arm in arm down the Strand on a spring day without worrying about reporters following us. We — "

"Will you shut up and kiss me, Julie?"

"All right," she said.

She was in his arms, her gown tumbling open, and his hands slipped around behind to cup the ripe globes

of her buttocks, and he felt her starting to sigh and grow excited, and for a wild moment he thought that he was going to have her right here, on the floor of her own dressing-room. But that was madness. Anyone might hear them. The walls were just flimsy partitions here. The door wasn't even locked.

Reluctantly, he let go of her and stepped back. Her face was reddened and flustered; her bare breasts rose and fell excitedly. She covered herself.

Durward said, "We can't be seen leaving here together, not even from the side door. Not with Finch-Starrett snooping around here."

"Then what will we do?"

"I'll leave now. Through the side way. I'll go home and get my car. It's a blue Jaguar racer. I'll park at the corner of Wardour and, oh, Broadwick. As soon as you've had your curtain call, clear out the side way, make sure no one sees you, and walk up Wardour. I'll be waiting for you. Does that sound all right?"

She smiled gamely. "It's rather on the cloak-and-dagger side, isn't it?"

"Unavoidable. Everything clear?"

"Corner of Wardour and Broadwick, just after midnight, blue Jaguar. All clear, commander."

"Swell. I'll go, then."

"Give us a kiss first, eh?"

"With pleasure."

Her lips were warm and soft against his. He felt her body pressed tight, her loins undulating slowly sideways, inflaming him, arousing him, tantalizing him. He dug his fingers deep into the flesh of her back, kneading it, massaging it. Passion made the muscles of his jaws go tense and knotted and painful. With an inner struggle,

he forced himself to let go of her. Her eyes were shining with love.

"I wish I didn't have to wait till midnight to go with you, Howard!"

"It's the rules, dear. Always stick by the rules."

"Naturally."

"Pip-pip."

"Cheerio," she said.

Cautiously, he opened the door, peered into the corridor. The usual hurly-burly of broad-butted chorines milling around, but he didn't mind that. What he dreaded was seeing the lean, lantern-jawed Finch-Starrett physiognomy peering from a concealed nook.

No sign of any snoopers.

Durward made his way hastily through the corridor to the rear entrance. He opened the door, and a voice called out, "Close that, it's bloody drafty, I'll get a cold in the arse!" and then he slipped out into the night.

He picked his path down the fire-escape a step at a time. Cautious, now. Don't want to trip and split your ruddy skull open, he thought. Wouldn't look good in the morning editions of the papers.

He reached the street. "Taxi! I say, taxi!"

No one had seen him leave. At least, no one who could identify him. He tried to relax as the taxi drove toward Park Lane, but tension was welling up fearfully in him. He felt that every nerve was stretched practically to the breaking point. He couldn't go on this way too very much longer. This hole-and-corner lurking, this bluffing, these fears —

But where was the way out?

No way out.

He was home by half past eleven. He went upstairs, washed up, took a caffeine tablet to give him a renewed jolt of energy. Thank God it was Friday, he thought. This pace was starting to wear him down.

Shortly after eleven-forty-five, he got into the Jaguar and drove slowly and carefully back to Wardour Street, pulling up in a darkened stretch on the intersection. It was just past midnight, now. A couple of blocks down, at the Merriment, the girls were up on stage now, taking their bows. He waited.

He didn't like the idea of Julie having to walk a considerable distance in this dark neighborhood. But there was no help for it. There couldn't be any risk-taking, not with Finch-Starrett in attendance. Bleakly, he watched the hands of his watch go around, while keeping one eye on the street.

Someone coming, now. Someone in a skirt. But then the street lamp down the block picked out a puff of black hair. Just a young streetwalker strolling along.

But now someone else, moving briskly.

Julie.

He started the engine of his car. She was drawing near now, and he thrust his arm out of the window, waved to her. She waved back and began to run. He could hear the skittering sounds her high heels made on the pavement.

He opened the door for her. She got in, leaning across to kiss him.

"Hello, darling."

"You're right on time," he said. "But I thought you'd never come. Everything go according to plan?"

"Perfectly. Nobody saw me leave."

He put the car into gear and they glided away

from the curb. Her hand rested lightly on his shoulder. She crossed her legs.

"Mind if I light a cig?" she asked.

"Go ahead. The lighter's over there on the dash."

She lit up. "Want one?"

"Never touch the things," Durward said.

"Where are we going, Howard?"

"My flat," he said.

"Do you think it's safe?"

"Absolutely. I've got no prying neighbors whatever, Julie."

"Where do you live?"

"Park Lane. Right smack between the Grosvenor House and the Dorchester."

"Pretty swell neighborhood."

"Isn't it, though?" He laughed. "You know, when I was young I promised myself two things: a house on Park Lane, and a hunting lodge in the Scottish Highlands. They were the first things I bought after I hit the big money."

"Are you happy, now that you have them?" she asked.

"Moderately."

"Why only moderately?"

"Possessions are fine things to have. So are lots of pound notes. But everything becomes worthless unless you've got someone to share the possessions with and someone to spend the pound on."

"Poor Howard. You've never married, have you?"

"No."

"Why not?"

He shrugged. "Partly because I never found the right girl, I guess. But that's not the real reason. Real

reason is I just wasn't looking very hard."

"You wanted to be a bachelor?"

"A matter of convenience. For a long time I was working fifteen, sixteen hours a day. Would have been an imposition on any wife of mine. But I don't work that sort of schedule any longer. Bachelorhood's just a habit with me now, I guess."

"An unbreakable habit?"

"Who knows?" he said gaily. He pulled the Jaguar into the private parking spot. "We are here, mademoiselle."

He helped her from the car. She alighted prettily, with that wonderful natural grace of hers, her skirt flouncing out to show slim calves and fine knees. Odd, he thought, how exciting a mere view of legs can be, in these days when so much more is available to view so easily.

They went into the house. She was awed by his rooms. She gasped like a wonderstruck child at the splendid array of books; she clasped her hands in delight at the record cabinet and at the opulence of his hi-fi system; she peered at the original paintings in complete bedazzlement.

He went to the sideboard. "Sorry, I've got no rum on hand," he said. "Would you care for some brandy?"

"That would be wonderful," she said.

They sipped cognac and listened to records for a while, and then he took her on a tour of the other rooms. Her eyes glowed.

"Howard?"

"Yes, duck?"

"I'm — I'm afraid of this house. And of you too, I think."

"Afraid? Good Lord, of what?"

"Of the magnificence. I don't really belong here, you know that?"

"Nonsense!"

"I mean it. I'm just little Julie Kent from Leeds, and here I am in a millionaire's home, with paintings on the wall and enough books to last me a lifetime and a hi-fi that must have cost three thousand pounds, and I feel out of place, somehow."

He slipped his arms around her. "You're silly to talk like that, Julie. Am I any different in my home or in your flat? I'm the same person, yes?"

"Well, yes."

"You don't see me acting like a millionaire, do you? I'm not forever telling you how unimportant you are. God, I *love* you, Julie. And you aren't unimportant. you're beautiful and sweet and intelligent and — "

He stopped.

Her eyes were glistening with tears.

"What's the matter?" he asked quietly.

"The way you're talking. And the way I feel."

"I don't understand."

"We're getting too deeply involved, Howard. So fast, too. Pretty soon we'll be indispensable to each other. And that can't be."

"May I ask why not?"

"There's such a huge gulf between us, Howard. Be realistic. There's no future for us. You keep avoiding the question, but face it squarely. What future is there? You can't go on keeping me as your mistress without someone finding out, and then there'll be a scandal. Marrying me is even more impossible. So where are we headed?"

"Let's face these problems as they arise," he said.

"No. We musn't put them off." She looked piercingly at him. "I'll stay here tonight, Howard. We'll have had two nights together, once at my place, once at yours. Two beautiful memories. And then we'll go our separate ways. We won't see each other after tonight."

"No, Julie!"

"It's the wisest thing," she said quietly. "You won't ever come to the Merriment again, and so our paths won't cross. Gradually the pain of not seeing each other will die away, and we'll have — just the memories of last night and this."

He shook his head and paced tensely about. "Don't talk of parting, for God's sake! We're only just beginning."

"Beginning something foolish and dangerous, something rash that should never have been allowed to get started."

"Do you regret it so soon?"

"I regret exposing you to dangers, Howard."

He shook his head angrily. "Let me worry about the dangers, will you? What business is it of yours if I want to run risks? Can't you see how much I love you?"

She didn't answer. Tears were running freely down her cheeks now. He put his arms about her, kissing away the salt of her tears, tipping her face up to his, forcing the corners of her mouth into a smile.

"Tell me you love me," he said.

"I love you, Howard."

"And no nonsense about not seeing each other any more, agreed?"

"Agreed," she whispered.

They had some more brandy, cuddling close on the couch in front of the speaker system, and then, without a word they rose and went into the bedroom. He began to undress her, but tonight she was fiercely impatient, and before he had removed more than her blouse she was helping him, ripping away her bra and her skirt and all the rest until she stood nude before him, her nostrils flaring in desire.

He stripped. And she came at him like a tigress, wild with love and lust.

They went down together to the bed, squirming in each other's arms, wrestling as much as making love. She had a wiry strength about her that challenged the bigger, stronger Durward, and they fought in silence, grinning at each other, until he finally pinned her. Gripping both her arms, he sat on her knees and bent forward to kiss the proud thrusts of her breasts. Her nipples were taut and distended, telling of her inner excitement.

Then he let go of her, and she held tight to him while he covered her body with his lips, an inch at a time.

"Do you like that?" he said.

"Very much."

"Shall I do it again?"

"Again and again."

He repeated the action, and she moaned with pleasure and rubbed her thighs against each other. He dug his fingers then into the soft flesh of her buttocks, and he could smell the desire-scent rising from her, and when he touched her breasts he was aware of the savage pounding of her heart. There was something almost terrifying about the intensity of her excitement, as

though she were a woman aroused fully for the first time, just beginning to come to the erotic maturity that was rightfully hers.

He stroked the tawny smoothness of her body, and she caressed him with her fingertips, and then with her lips, until he was gasping and eager, and in a sudden playful bound she pushed him over on his back, and he looked up and saw her smiling as she lowered herself over him until their bodies joined.

He could feel her quivering. She was almost at the verge of a spasm right at the outset, and it came, and he met the challenge and rode with it, pulling her down, and they tumbled over and over on the bed and then to the floor, landing heavily but without damage.

Two animals in rut they were, casting aside every inhibition of civilization, concentrating everything on the torrid bond of flesh that linked them. Body thrusting against body, a mountainous savage double onslaught.

They paused momentarily once, then resumed, exhausting themselves in their quest of physical fulfillment, riding upward and upward, hoping to leave the prying world behind. Once Durward opened his eyes and saw her face inches from his own, the firm cheeks flushed and ruddy, the eyes glowing with excitement, and then he felt the swelling rise of tingling sensation within him and closed his eyes again pressing tight against her.

Body writhing, breasts jouncing, face distorted with passion now, she clung to him. He heard her saying things to him, half-coherent things, words of love, of endearment, words then in no language he had ever heard before, and he gasped out, feeling that he could go on no further, and then yet went further on.

"Howard!" she cried. "Now — now — now!"

It was the culminating moment. He felt his heart beat in triple time, felt sweat break from every pore of his skin, felt himself on fire. Then it came, and he shook and felt the answering tremor from her body as she responded, and then he was racing to the wild summit and she was at his side, a thoroughbred turning in a superb performance.

They hardly moved as it happened. They held each other tight as rippling eddies swept overwhelmingly over them. He rocked and shuddered with the impact, and buried his face in her breasts, and wondered vaguely whether they had not driven their bodies too far, whether this wild act of love had not passed the peak of mere human limitations. He heard her soft gasp of completion, the long sigh of delight that he heard from so many women's lips, but never with such heartstopping intensity, and then the tension went out of them both.

They lay limp and exhausted and drained on the straw mat by the side of Durward's bed. He opened his eyes first, and smiled at her. With his lips alone, he shaped the words *I love you* as she opened her eyes.

"I love you," she replied, the words barely audible as she struggled to recover her breath.

There was no need to say anything further. They curled against each other, her soft nakedness fitting against his body as though shaped to fit it, and he nodded at her and pillowed his head against her rising breasts.

He was tired, so very tired. But he felt utterly relaxed, utterly at peace with the world. What did the Finch-Starretts matter, the Major Jarrells, the Sir Rolands?

Love was what mattered. And he had love, suddenly, unexpectedly. He had been surprised by joy, that night at the Merrimer[illegible] and now it wa[illegible] bursting into full flowering, beyond an[illegible]ing he could [illegible]e dreamed. His hand spread out across the satiny curves of her buttocks, and he caressed the softness of her, and told himself that this was the way he wished to spend the rest of his life, just as [illegible] was spending it now. Naked, against the lovely naked form of Julie Kent.

Her breasts rose and fell slowly, evenly, now. He kissed her lightly and closed his eyes. Sleep took him as it had taken her, there on the straw mat by the side of the rumpled bed.

CHAPTER NINE

SOME TIME DURING THE NIGHT he awoke, and found himself on the floor, and rose, lifting Julie gently without awakening her. They settled comfortably in each other's arms on the bed, and they were still there when Durward woke for a second time as bright daylight came streaming into his bedroom.

At this time of year, he knew, the sun didn't strike his bedroom windows until quite late in the day. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he peered at his watch, saw that it was half past one. They had really slept. And small wonder, Durward thought, taking into consideration the searing intensity of their lovemaking last

night. After a bout like that, bodies needed time to recharge their batteries, to rebuild their depleted stamina.

Julie was still deep in sleep. She lay on her side, lips drawn up in a smile, hands clasped together under her cheek. He leaned toward her, stroking the silky length of her hip and thigh, digging his fingernails lightly and gently into the firm fleshy globe of her buttock.

"Julie?"

"Mmmm?"

"Julie, are you awake?"

"No."

"It's half past one, Julie."

"Mmmmph."

"Half past one in the afternoon."

She stirred fitfully. "It can't be," she muttered sleepily. "We just went to bed."

"Open your eyes and see for yourself."

"If I open my eyes I might wake up," she murmured in a soft, furry voice.

He cupped his hand over the firm round swell of her nearer breast. "If you wake up, I'll kiss you."

"Promise?"

"Yes."

"Kiss first. Then I wake up."

He grinned and leaned over her, putting his lips to hers, and, without opening her eyes, she swivelled around onto her back, drawing him down on top of her, thrusting her tongue deep within his mouth, clamping her thighs about his hips, pressing her breasts against his chest. Her kiss was wildly passionate, and for a moment Durward thought that they were going to make love again, but the sudden flame died down as rapidly as it had burst into being. She opened her eyes and

smiled playfully up at him.

"Good morning, my darling."

"It's afternoon, Julie. Good afternoon, my beloved."

Her eyes widened in abrupt panic. "Afternoon? What time in the afternoon?"

"I told you."

"I wasn't awake when you told me. What time is it, Howard?"

"About one-thirty," he said. "Why?"

"I've got to be at the Merriment by half past five at the latest," Julie said. "I was afraid I'd slept right through the day. It *is* Saturday, isn't it?"

"So far as I know," Durward said.

He rose, stretching, walked to the window, looked out. A beautiful day. The April sun was high, having burned away the morning fog while they had slept. From his window, he had a view of the greenness of Hyde Park, stretching off to the west.

"We have four hours before you must report to work," Durward said. "How shall we spend them?"

"I'd like a bath, first. And then breakfast. And then we can take a stroll in the park. Down to the Serpentine. We can buy a small boat and sail it."

"I haven't done that in twenty-five years."

"It'll be fun. And then—" She paused. "Oh, Howard, Howard!"

"What's the matter, Julie?"

"Do we dare walk in the park?"

"Why not?"

"All your neighbors. They'll see us. We're bound to meet someone in the park—"

"My neighbors don't go to the Merriment Revue Club," Durward said. "Even if they did, they'd not

recognize you, not with your clothes on."

"I'm afraid for you, Howard."

"Will you stop it?" he said, a bit too brusquely. "Will you let me worry about this problem?"

"But I'd feel so bad, knowing that you got into some sort of trouble on my account."

"We'll walk in the park," he said firmly, muscles knotting along his jaws. "We can't live in constant fear. It doesn't make any sense. We've got every right to love one another, regardless of Finch-Starrett and that breed." He turned away from the window, feeling bleak and almost despondent. Why had she had to remind him? It had been such a wonderful day in the outset, and here he was back in last night's depression again. He forced himself to brighten. "Come. I'll draw a bath for you. You like your baths hot?"

"Scalding."

"Prepare to be boiled alive, then."

He went into the master bathroom adjoining his bedroom, and drew her a hot bath. When he returned to the bedroom, he found her stretched out again, either asleep or pretending to be asleep. He patted her buttocks gently.

"Bath's ready."

"Sleepy."

"The bath'll wake you up. Come along, now."

He helped her up and into the bathroom. Then he stood back, studying the fluid lines of her body in utter delight as, impishly, she touched one toe to the water, drew it back with a little gasp, replaced it, gradually slipped it under the surface. Slowly, she settled into the tub and reached for the soap. He watched her lather her breasts, enjoying the sensation of looking at her

here in the privacy of his bathroom.

He left, while she bathed, and went down the hall to the smaller bathroom for a quick shower and shave. Refreshed and alert, he belted himself into his dressing-gown just as Julie emerged from her bath, pink and flushed and clean.

"Enjoy it?" he asked.

"It was wonderful. Such a big tub—practically like a swimming-pool!"

"It's a nice one, all right. Here, let me give you one of my robes."

She giggled. "Don't be silly. They'd all be yards too big. Do you mind if I just go around like this, instead of putting anything on?"

"Of course I don't mind!"

"Then I shall." She grinned. "I'm afraid I'm lost in this big place, though. If you'll show me to your kitchen, I'll try to get some breakfast together for us."

Durward had known many pleasures, but never that of being given his breakfast by a nude, dazzlingly beautiful blonde. He sat quietly at the kitchen table, pretending to be looking through the morning papers, while Julie moved around his kitchen with such efficiency that it might have been her own. Out of the meager supply of foodstuff that Durward kept on hand, she concocted an extravagant omelet, topped off with crisp bacon, and brought it to the table with a flourish.

They ate ravenously. Durward, tossing the paper aside, looked at her as though he had never seen a naked woman before. He never had, not across the kitchen table. She seemed almost to be glowing. Her breasts were flushed and rosy, the nipples risen, even the flesh of her breasts seeming to expand in the haze of erotic

excitement that suffused her. She was alert, tremendously vivacious, excited by what was happening to both of them.

Durward himself felt more thoroughly alive than he had in months. All winter, he had wandered in a gray tangle of finance, fighting paper dragons, downing his adversaries with a telephone call or a press release. Now, for the first time in he did not know how many months, he felt fully alive in a sensual, physical way.

Julie had done it.

Julie had reclaimed him from the drab routine of money-making.

He said, as they mopped up the remnants of their omelets, "What sort of vacation do you get, Julie?"

"My holidays?"

"That's right. How long, and when?"

"I get two weeks between each show. Six weeks a year, in other words."

"And when's the next one due?"

She thought for a moment. "Let's see, now. I started on at the Merriment just over a month ago. March, April, May, June, July. I'm due for two weeks July 10."

"A pity it's so far in the future."

"What do you have in mind, Howard?"

"We'll go away together. Far from London, far from the snoopers and priers. Where would you like to go, Julie? Name any place at all."

She thought for a moment. "Wales?"

"Wales? That's an afternoon's ride. I mean going *away*, Julie. Far. Some other country."

"Spain?" she said hesitantly.

"You'd like to go there, would you?"

"I'd love it, Howard. The bullfights, the color, the castles—"

"Never been abroad, have you?"

"Never."

He drummed on the tabletop. "Spain's a fascinating place. But not in July, I'm afraid. It's beastly hot there, you know. And all of the hotels are full of Americans during the summer. Let's save Spain, shall we? You're due for your next holiday after this one in, let me see, November. We'll go to Spain then. And in July —what about Sweden, eh, Julie?"

Her eyes were gleaming. "How wonderful!"

"Yes, Sweden it is," he said. "We'll be there at the height of summer. Nights full of sunlight. We'll rent a cottage by a lake, and we'll swim nude and make love under the midnight sun—"

She laughed with glee. "Just like in all the Swedish movies I've seen!"

"Exactly. And people will think you're a native, because of your blonde hair and your blue eyes and the way you walk and hold your shoulders, and they'll come up to you and ask you things in Swedish—"

"And I'll answer them," Julie said. "I'll buy a little book, *Swedish in Thirty Days*, something like that. I'll study it ever so hard before we leave. And then I can be your interpreter. Or do you speak Swedish?"

"Not a syllable."

"Good. Then I'll be useful on the trip. I don't want to be excess baggage. I like to be useful. And then in the evenings, we can go to the best restaurants, and sit together and even hold hands, and nobody will know who we are, and there'll be no reporters around—it'll be wonderful, Howard. I'm excited already. I can't wait

for July to come around, you know?"

"Neither can I. Maybe you could get your holiday moved up a few months."

She shook her head. "I couldn't. I'm a big draw at the club, and the spring season's a big one. D'amato would never let me go. Not after I've only been working there a bit over a month. It would give all the other girls ideas. He'd never be able to keep his scheduling straight once he began granting special holidays."

"I suppose. We'll just have to wait till July, then."

"It's only three more months. And then in November we'll go to Spain. Do you speak Spanish, Howard?"

"A little."

"I'll learn that, too. I want to know all the languages there are. And my next leave is in March. Where shall we go in March? Someplace warm?"

"What about India?"

"Marvelous!" she cried. "And then in July, we could go to—let me think—America. The Rocky Mountains. The Grand Canyon."

"And in November to the Caribbean." he said.

"And then the next March, to the Riviera."

"And Vienna in July."

"And Rome in November."

"And Japan in March."

"And New York—"

"And South America—"

"And China—"

They went on for nearly five minutes, gobbling up the world like children, planning vacations for years in advance, laughingly topping each other with more and more obscure places to go on their three-times-a-year jaunts, until Julie had offered Afghanistan and Durward

Armenia and Julie Cambodia and Durward the Sudan, and then Julie suggested Florida and Durward, reminded of the American rocket-launching base down there, said, "By now we're up to July 1973, at the very least. So why be mundane? We can spend two weeks on Mars, by then."

She smiled. "But we've overlooked one thing. By 1973 I'll be past thirty years old. Who'll pay good money to see an old woman of thirty-odd take her clothes off? I'll be in retirement by then."

"You'll be positively an antique," Durward said.

"I will be. And so I'll be able to take as many weeks as I like, because I won't have to worry about Mr. D'amato and his bookings. So we can have three weeks on Mars."

"A month."

"Six months."

"A year," he said. "Unless we don't like it. Let's have a kiss, shall we?"

"A kiss for Mars," Julie said.

She came around the table toward him, and he stood up, and as he put his arms around her she caught at the belt of his dressing-gown, pulling it open, drawing the gown out so it enfolded both of them Her warm, nude body jutted up against his. He could feel the hot hard points of her breasts boring into his body, could feel the firm flatness of her belly smooth against him, the roundness of her thighs, and his hands went to her buttocks, squeezing them, forcing her more tightly against him.

He saw her eyes, wide and excited, the pupils blurring with desire.

He saw her nostrils begin to flare as the breath

became harder for her.

He saw the color mount in her cheeks.

They stood there face to face in a tight body-lock, and then she reached up and brushed the robe from his shoulders with an easy gesture. She smiled, and undulated her body back and forth, lightly grazing him with her distended nipples, and he nodded, and she returned the nod, and put her hands on his shoulders and pressed downward.

Slowly, she sank to a crouching position, forcing him down with her, and then, with that strange catlike suppleness of hers, she let herself roll backward, her buttocks lowering to touch the linoleum flooring of the kitchen, her legs unfolding and coming forward to surround him, and her body thrusting upward, upward to receive him. She sat there on the floor, arms behind her now, legs lightly arched, and he lowered himself toward her.

She gasped and leaned back as far as she could go, putting her hands on his buttocks and pressing downward to hold him to her. Body moved against body in the by now familiar rhythms of mutual gratification. He hammered at her until he thought he would be hurting her, but she met each motion eagerly and excitedly with a counter-movement of her own. Their passions mounted in an intertwining spire until, with a final outrushing of breath, they clasped each other tight and hurried on to the heart-punishing culmination.

They rested a long while afterward.

"I love you," Durward murmured finally.

"My darling. Yes. It feels so good to say something like that. Darling." She kissed the tip of his nose. "To feel you there, inside me. The most wonderful feeling

in the world."

"Am I crushing you?"

"You're like a feather. Only—"

"Only what?"

She laughed. "My rear is getting cold. The linoleum isn't quite a carpet."

He roared in amusement and, getting up, hauled her to her feet. He threw his arms about her.

Sunlight streamed in.

It was a perfect day, a day when the entire universe seemed to move on jewelled bearings. Durward felt like a boy again.

A boy in love for the first time.

He drank in her nakedness with his eyes, and smiled, and kissed her, and they went hand-in-hand out of the kitchen.

It was half-past-two, now. They dressed quickly, wanting to get outdoors while the afternoon was still at its height, and, leaving the house, crossed busy Park Lane and entered Hyde Park. Here in early spring, the trees were just bursting into their first tentative yellow buds of leaves, and the grass was recovering its green brightness. The park was full of lovers today, most of them seeming young, so terribly young.

The ripening of spring in every direction had a massive effect on Durward's emotions. He saw the lovers, and he saw the budding leaves, and he saw the twittering birds hopping through the branches, and a lump formed in his throat, and mingled sadness and joy weighed him down.

Here I am, thirty-six years old, going on thirty-seven in a mere matter of ten months. And I have no wife, no children, no one closer to me than Puddy

Laughton, for God's sake.

That's no way to live a life.

Here I am, worth two or three millions, and every chance that I'll have multiplied each pound I have by ten or twenty before I cash in, and what shall I have built with all that money? I don't lead a life of riotous dissipation. I don't give parties that use up ten thousand pounds of caviar and champagne. By and large I've lived a sober, respectable, quiet life of diligent money-making.

For what?

The temptation was strong in him to throw over the traces, to stop being staunch, dignified Howard Durward for a moment, to step out of the prison of his own character and do something really startling.

Like marrying Julie?

It was a stunning thought, coming as it did with such seriousness. What could do more to shatter the reputation of tall, serious-minded, stalwart Howard Durward than to marry a stripper?

I love her.

He knew that. She was a beautiful girl, an intelligent girl, an unselfish girl. She had every quality a wealthy Englishman would desire in a wife.

Except rank and reputation. Except birth.

They walked along, his arm tight around her waist, and he thought of it. It would cause a cry of horror, of course. To marry a common stripper? Doors would close to him all over London. There was no way of hiding Julie's past, nor would he care to. But he would have to resign from his clubs, of course. He'd lose many important social and business contacts. Friends of ten years' standing would cut him dead on the streets. Oh,

Puddy Laughton would stick by him, and Tom Birrell. Probably even Paul Martlett, though the stockbroker, with his own reputation to look out for, would take care not to be seen in public with him.

Is it worth it? he asked himself.

Every atom of romance in him shrieked out that it was, it was, it was. Today had been such a beautiful day, with Julie, as they had awakened, as they had bathed, and breakfasted, and talked of the trips they would take, and then had made love. But another side of him answered that it was absurb to think of anything more than a quick, clandestine affair. Marrying Julie, even keeping company with her for any length of time, would mean the loss of all he had worked toward.

He had come out of nowhere, out of humble birth. And he had risen to a position of importance. He was consulted on matters of finance, even on matters of government, lately. There was pressure on him to take a seat in Parliament at the next elections. He had risen swiftly, but there was still much left for him to conquer. With his commanding figure and gift for ready oratory, he could rise in Parliament, could become a national figure within a few years.

Howard Durward, Chancellor of the Exchequer. Why not?

Prime Minister Durward—

Or perhaps a peerage, as a reward for long public service. *Lord Durward. Viscount Durward.* Thirty years from now, covered with glory, he would ascend into the Valhalla of the House of Lords.

"Howard, what are you thinking of?" Julie asked, cutting into the reverie.

"Just daydreaming, darling."

"Love me?"

"Very much."

"I love you more than I can tell you," she whispered, nestling tight against him as they walked, so he could feel the full globe of her breast at his side.

They walked on, and they were nearly at the Serpentine, now. The usual crowd of small boys gathered at the water's edge, cheering on their toy boats in the old tradition.

Men who married strippers didn't get elected to Parliment, Durward thought. Nor did they get chosen for company directorships, nor did they receive peerages. The mere thought of presenting Julie at Buckingham Palace was grotesque. "And this is Lady Durward, Your Majesty." And Julie going into a low curtsey while the Queen smiles, Oh, of course, Durward thought. Very bloody likely.

His arm tightened around Julie's waist until the girl had to catch her breath.

Where are we heading? Durward wondered. *What's going to come out of all this? Where does it lead?*

For the first time in his adult life, he had no answers to any of those questions.

CHAPTER TEN

THEY WANDERED ABOUT THE PARK for more than an hour, until the weather began to change. A brisk breeze blew, the sunny skies grew dark, there was a brief spring shower. Durward and Julie were down near Rotten Row by that time, and they sheltered under a spreading elm until the rain passed. then left the park quickly at Hyde Park Corner. Julie was tired; Durward hailed a cab that took them back up Park Lane to Mount Street.

He drove her from his place to hers in the Jaguar. Just as she was about to get out, he put his hand on hers and said, "When shall I see you again?"

"Tonight, after the last show, as usual?"

"All right," he said. "I'll be waiting with the car, the same place as last night."

She smiled. "There's no show tomorrow, so we'll have all day together."

"Perhaps we can take a drive into the country," he said. "Up to Windsor, perhaps. Or further."

She squeezed his hand. "I'd love to, Howard. See you at midnight."

"At midnight," he said.

He drove reflectively back down the Edgeware Road to his home. His mood was a melancholy one. He felt at loose ends with himself. Here it was Saturday afternoon, and he had no plans for the evening. Usually on Saturdays he went to the theater, or had dinner with one of his female friends, or went out somewhere with his friends from the club. But Julie's odd schedule upset all that. He had never before had to wait until midnight to begin his evening.

He wondered how he was going to use up the seven hours plus that remained of Saturday. He thought of phoning one of the two or three women he was accustomed to taking out, but somehow it seemed to him that he could not sit across the table from anyone but Julie. After all, he had been to bed with Erica and with Georgette and with Bess, though always in a casual and uninvolved way and never very frequently with any of them. But tonight he felt it would be a kind of betrayal to have dinner with any of his old companions. In an odd way he felt like a newly married man, which was a totally unfamiliar sensation for him.

Still and all, there was a whole Saturday evening to kill. And Puddy in Cornwall, and Birrell and Mart-

lett off fishing somewhere—

He settled down in his study, mixing himself a cocktail, and wondered what to do for the rest of the day. *Call Erica,* he thought again. Of the three women he had been seeing this past year, she was the most reliable. A strikingly beautiful widow of forty, she was wealthy, impeccably connected socially, formidably well educated. He had been in bed with her perhaps half a dozen times in the past year and a half he had known her, but their sex relationship had been an abstract thing, a mere mutual fulfillment of physical needs, a mere meeting of genitals without any involvement of personality. Yes, he thought, Erica was the person to talk to. She could be taken into his confidence. She might help him gain some perspective on this strange tumult of emotions into which he had so abruptly been plunged. And she could give him advice in an impersonal way, without letting all kinds of private longings and needs interfere with her appraisal of the situation.

Yes, he would call Erica.

He started for the telephone. But before he reached it, it began ringing of its own accord.

He frowned and picked it up.

"Durward," he said.

A thin, harsh voice grated against his eardrum. "Good afternoon, Mr. Durward. This is Harold Finch-Starrett. I do hope I'm not disturbing you."

Durward's frown deepened into an annoyed scowl. "What is it, Finch-Starrett?"

"I've got a matter of extreme importance to take up with you, Mr. Durward. If I could only have a short segment of your time to take it up with you—"

"Go ahead," Durward said curtly. "What's on your

mind? There's nothing new on the Dynamic Automation merger, if you're looking for some kind of statement from me about that, Finch-Starrett."

The journalist's laugh was raspingly unpleasant. "Oh, goodness, no, Durward, I haven't turned into a financial columnist yet! Not by a long shot!"

Durward was irritated by the casual way Finch-Starrett had slipped into using his last name just then, as though they were equals, or old friends, or as though Finch-Starrett were a person of consequence. But he kept his temper in check as he said, "Very well. What is it, then?"

"Oh, I couldn't just put it to you over the phone, Durward. It's too delicate for that."

For the first time, Durward felt a tinge of fear. He kept his voice steady. "Will you stop playing this absurdly coy game with me, Finch-Starrett? What is it you want with me, eh?"

"A brief talk."

"In person?"

"That's right. Face to face, Durward."

"I'm an extremely busy man."

"I understand that," Finch-Starrett said. "We are all of us extremely busy men. But I do wish you'd spare time to see me. It's of vital importance to your future welfare, let me assure you of that."

"But you can't tell me what it's all about?"

"Not so remotely as by telephone."

Durward let his breath escape impatiently. "Very well. Where shall we meet?"

"Why not be my dinner guest?" Finch-Starrett suggested surprisingly. "We could eat at my club."

The suggestion was an astonishing one. Somehow,

he had not thought of Finch-Starrett as the clubman type, though he knew that the newspaperman came from a noble family.

And the thought of sitting across a table from Finch-Starrett for the entire length of a meal made his stomach crawl with revulsion. Nor did he want to obligate himself to Finch-Starrett even to the extent of a meal. That dinner would have to be repaid. And dining with Finch-Starrett was no more appetizing to Durward than diving head-first into a mucked-up cesspool.

He said glibly, "I'm afraid I can't make it for dinner tonight, old man. A prior engagement, you understand."

"Of course, Durward. Saturday, and all that."

"Yes. But perhaps we could meet earlier, for half an hour or so—"

"For cocktails," Finch-Starrett said. "At my club. Say, in forty-five minutes? Or will that put too much of a squeeze on you, Durward?"

"I suppose I can make it. What's your club?"

"The Charlton, on Saville Row. Do you know it?"

"I've been there."

"Fine. I'll be in the smoking lounge waiting for you. At, say, ten minutes after six."

"Yes," Durward said. "The Charlton, at ten past six."

Perplexed and moody, he slipped into dinner clothes. The conversation with Finch-Starrett had left him tense and apprehensive. The thin-faced schemer could be up to no good; he never was. And the chummy, almost patronizing way he had invited Durward first to dinner, then to cocktails, indicated that Finch-Starrett was supremely confident of success in whatever maneuver he

was trying to engineer. Durward didn't like that. He didn't enjoy consorting with newspapermen, and he had a particular dislike for Harold Finch-Starrett, the prying prototype of his profession.

He was late getting to Finch-Starrett's club. It was a deliberate move, primed to restore to him a certain measure of control in the situation. He didn't like to be maneuvered by anyone, and he certainly didn't care to be maneuvered by Finch-Starrett. Showing up fifteen minutes late was his way of showing that he still had some freedom of action. He left the Jaguar in the Charlton's member's parking lot, and went into the club, going directly to the smoking lounge.

Finch-Starrett was there already, his lean, angular form hunched over a nearly empty glass. His face seemed drawn and tense. He snapped to his feet as Durward entered, coming to meet him with outstretched hand.

"Durward. Good to see you."

Durward nodded, taking the hand in a perfunctory way, and offering no apologies for his lateness. He gave Finch-Starrett such a steely look that the journalist seemed visibly shaken.

But Finch-Starrett recovered his poise. "Come, come, have a seat. What will you be drinking?"

"Port, I think."

"Yes, the club has excellent port. *Excellent.*" Finch-Starrett beckoned to a waiter, who came quickly over to take the order. Minutes later a bottle of port stood on the table between them.

"It's a '34 that the club foresightedly bought in huge quantities," Finch-Starrett said. "They laid down cases and cases, but most of it's gone now. More's the

pity. I tried to pick some up for my own cellars, but it's selling at some two guineas the bottle, now. Frightfully expensive."

"Not if you feel it's worth it," Durward said.

"Oh, I do, I do. But we aren't always in a position to gratify ourselves with every luxury we would desire. At least, I'm not. I realize a man in your position is better able to pamper himself in some ways."

"Do you think I pamper myself, Finch-Starrett?"

"You know what I mean. When you're really well off, you never have to stop to look at price-tags. It's otherwise for poor mortals like ourselves."

"I didn't know you were struggling financially," Durward said. He gestured about him. "This doesn't look like an inexpensive club, a refuge for paupers."

Finch-Starrett smiled thinly. "My membership here is an endowment from my grandfather. Otherwise I shouldn't be able to keep it up. I'm not privately wealthy. It's the fate of the younger son of a younger son, I'm afraid. By the time the pie is parcelled out, one's share is not very great." Finch-Starrett's cold, flat eyes glinted at Durward with envy, money-envy. Durward felt distinctly uncomfortable, wishing profoundly he had never consented to meet with the newspaperman. Finch Starrett went on, "And, of course, my salary's not munificent. I daresay I'm one of the best-paid men on the staff, of course, but that isn't saying much when you consider what the bottom rung gets. Imagine eight pounds a week for a reporter on a powerful daily! The figure rises, but none too steeply. And, I must add, there are many expenses that I must maintain in order to keep contact with my sources of information — an endless round of parties, gifts, travelling — not all of it

underwritten by the paper by any means, let me assure you! And —"

Finch-Starrett seemed to be in a wordy mood, as though he were determined to befuddle and bewilder Durward with verbiage before getting down to the main point of the conversation. Durward found the discussion of Finch-Starrett's financial difficulties dreadfully dull, and embarrassing in the bargain. He sipped his port quickly, helping himself to a refill, and glanced from time to time at his watch in a meaningful way.

Finch-Starrett did not take the hint. He droned on, giving examples of costly situations he had gone into for the sake of a story, without being reimbursed. Listening with only half an ear, Durward began to get the impression that Finch-Starrett's expenses outran his income by several hundred per cent.

At length Durward said, "I'm afraid I can't remain here much longer, Finch-Starrett."

"That dinner engagement. Yes, I know."

"And so, if you wouldn't mind going on to whatever it is that you summoned me here to discuss —"

"Certainly," Finch-Starrett said. With a suave gesture, he thrust one bony hand into his breast pocket and came out with a sheet of yellow foolsap that had been folded over several times. Without unfolding it, he handed it across the table to Durward, saying, "I'd appreciate it if you'd read that and give me your opinion of it."

Puzzled, Durward unfolded the sheet, spreading it out in front of him. A short paragraph had been typed double-spaced in the middle of the sheet.

He read it with growing confusion.

It said:

Industrialist Howard Durward (he's top man of Durward Ventures, Ltd., hard-driving takeover outfit) forms half of one of the most ill-assorted twosomes in town these days. The other half is a blonde, shapely ecdysiast (stripper to you) who's stirring blood-pressure three times a night at the Merriment Revue Club in Soho. If you'd like to see what sort of damsel arouses the passions of the dashing, debonair Durward (who has been mentioned frequently of late as Parliamentary material) just drop around to the Merriment and keep your eyes peeled. You'll see every delectable square inch. Fun is fun, friend Howard, but it's Peter Pry's opinion that you're doing neither your company nor your career any good. You may still be considered a good shot for Prime Minister in the 1970's, but keep in mind that one's past has a way of coming back to haunt one, and that you can't command national respect by openly flouting the morality of the little people who are the real backbone of the British electorate. Take care, that's our advice, and remember that you must be as far above reproach as Caesar.

Shock and horror seized Durward. He paled, and felt a stab of cold fear run through him.

So Finch-Starrett had found out!

He struggled for inner control. He looked up and said mildly, "You've got your rhetoric wrong. It's Caesar's wife, not Caesar, who has to be above reproach."

"I know that," Finch-Starrett said smugly. "I don't mind distorting the rhetoric to make a point neater. Besides, the point still holds. What do you think of what I've written there, Durward?"

"I think it's a monstrous pack of lies."

"Bravo! What else could you say, after all?"

Durward's hands trembled. He wanted to crumple the sheet, to hurl it into the fire.

"What do you intend to do with this scurrilous paragraph you've written?"

"Print it," Finch-Starrett said blandly. "I'm going to turn it in as the lead in my column Monday morning. It'll be in the evening editions."

"And you'll be embroiled in the hottest libel suit you ever imagined by Tuesday morning," said Durward in what he hoped were crisp, commanding terms.

"You'd regret that, Durward."

"Would I?"

"Of course. Because then I'd be compelled to produce my proof in order to defend myself against your action. And what began simply as a gossip-columnist's snide innuendo will become highly publicized fact. It'll break you, Durward. It'll crush you."

Durward fought back the rising panic within him. He stared across at the newspaperman's ugly, sallow face with contempt and hatred.

"Just what sort of proof of this wild story do you claim to have?"

"That's not for me to say. Suffice it to know that there's ample evidence you spend last night with Julie Kent, and probably the night before. I've worked very diligently today to line up proof for what I've been finding out about you and Miss Kent, and now I have it. You may deny anything you please, Durward, but I warn you very sincerely not to attempt to take me to court."

Durward poured himself a generous splash of wine.

"All right, Finch-Starrett. Without admitting the truth or claiming the falsity of what you've written here, may I ask why you've bothered to call me to this little conference? To gloat? To see my face as you give me an advance peek at Monday's diatribe?"

"I thought you deserved a look at it before the rest of the nation saw it, Durward."

"Damned decent of you," Durward said bitterly. "I didn't know you always looked out for your subjects' best interests that way. Naturally, I'd like to be prepared. By receiving this advance knowledge, all I need to do is to buy up the entire edition of your filthy sheet the moment it hits the street, and I'm safe from scandal."

"Very funny," Finch-Starrett said mirthlessly.

"Then why show it to me?"

"To give you a chance to persuade me not to run it," Finch-Starrett said. "I don't turn the column in until tomorrow. There's no reason why this paragraph must necessarily be in it."

"You're suggesting, then, that I buy you off?" Durward asked, barely able to control the whiplash of his anger as he spoke.

Finch-Starrett shrugged delicately. "As I mentioned earlier in this conversation, I'm not a man of means, and sometimes have difficulties making ends meet. You seemed quite understanding."

"But I won't bow to blackmail, damn you! Even if this thing were true, what makes you think I'd be afraid to have it noised about?"

Finch-Starrett sighed. "Let me explain the situation to you in detail, my dear Durward. On Wednesday, I understand, you are scheduled to have a highly important luncheon conference with Sir Ronald Walters,

the head of Dynamic Automation. Am I right?"

Durward stiffened. "I don't deny that."

"And also that the fate of your merger with Dynamic Automation hangs in considerable measure on the success of your luncheon meeting — which has already been postponed once when Sir Ronald developed certain doubts about the moral character of the head of Durward Ventures. Eh?"

"He was called away suddenly to Devon."

"Whatever the public reason," Finch-Starrett said casually. "Now. My little squib about you appears late Monday night. Sir Ronald does not read my column, perhaps, but it is reasonable to assume that someone in his immediate circle does and will call the subject to his attention. Just to reinforce the situation, someone might very well anonymously send him a cutting of the column, along with these."

Reaching into his breast pocket again, Finch-Starrett produced a squarish manila envelope, from which he drew three glossy color prints.

He laid them side by side on the table, facing Durward.

Durward's face flamed. They were prints of Julie. Nudes.

She wasn't wearing a stitch. On one, she wore high heels, in the other two she was totally nude. There was a front view, Julie in a shameless pose with her legs apart and her head thrown back. There was a side view, one knee drawn up, the lush contours of her breasts accentuated by her posture. There was a rear view, Julie standing with her body pivoted on a curve, her head turned halfway about, her blonde hair dangling down her bare back, her full firm buttocks saucily facing the

Nudes of Julie. Durward's hands shook. There she was, breasts and buttocks, thighs and crotch, hips and navel, every bit of her in glossy full color. Angrily, he huffled the photos together and turned them face down.

"Where did you get these?" he demanded.

Finch-Starrett smiled easily. "They're publicity shots. It's not hard for a man in my profession to get hold of pictures like these. The management of the Merriment is very happy to supply them to the right people. I've got quite a few more. These color shots are the best, that's all."

"And you'll send them to Sir Ronald?"

"I'll send them around, yes. To Sir Ronald, to a few important financial figures, to a few Members of Parliament such as Major Claude Jarrell. This is the woman Howard Durward keeps company with, I'll say. They'll be fascinated by the pictures. She's a beautiful woman, all right. But they'll be quite indignant. Eh?"

Durward felt his head throbbing. He thought his skull would explode.

"Why are you doing this?" he said in a hoarse whisper.

"Out of enlightened self-interest," Finch-Starrett said. "Do have some more port. Or must you run off to your dinner engagement, Durward?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DURWARD FILLED HIS GLASS and gulped the port down greedily, as though it were water. He gave the newspaperman a venomous look and said, "Why are you doing this?" a second time.

"Because I can profit from it," Finch-Starrett said. He hunched forward. "Let me spell it out. On Monday, I phone three or four investors I know who have substantial holdings in Durward Ventures common stock. I tell them that a news development soon to be released will adversely affect the price of shares in a company they've invested in. For a small price — say, ten thousand pounds apiece — I sell them the name of this

company, telling them they needn't pay me if the price of the stock fails to drop more than five shillings. They'll listen to me, and they'll dump their stock in a hurry. Prior to this, I'll have sold short a good deal of Durward Ventures stock myself, Monday morning."

"You snake," Durward said.

"You begin to see the thread, I take it? Monday evening, the news breaks. By Tuesday, Sir Ronald knows, and the merger is discontinued. You are a discredited man. There is a stampede to sell stock in DV. By this time my four friends have all safely unloaded before the collapse, I have earned forty thousand pounds in fees from them, and I pick up another goodly bundle on my short sale. Come Wednesday, the price of Durward Ventures common is down to a few shillings, the Government is investigating, you are on your way into hiding in disgrace, and I have cleared fifty to seventy-five thousand pounds in two days. Would you blame me for accepting such a windfall happily?"

"You miserable creature, you vermin," Durward muttered. "Don't you see that you'd be ruining hundreds of small investors — the little people that you make so much noise about in your column? You'll be wiping them out."

"A pity, is it not?"

"A tragedy, damn you! And one that could be avoided!"

"Ah, but only at great personal cost to me. And I've told you of my meager financial circumstances. Of course, the whole catastrophe could be circumvented."

"How?"

Finch-Starrett's eyes twinkled. "It's of no concern to me how I make my money, so long as I make it. As

I've said, I stand to clear a good figure from this. Let's call it seventy thousand quid, though it could be more. Now, if I could have my seventy thousand *without* touching off a panic, I think I'd be content."

"You mean I bribe you not to run the paragraph about me?"

"Precisely."

"Go to hell."

"Now who's ruining the little people?" Finch-Starrett asked mockingly. "Look: you're caught, Durward. You stand to lose heavily either way. If you bribe me, it costs you seventy thousand. If you stand on your honor, you'll lose a great deal more simply on the value of your own stock in your company, and you'll drag innocent people down to destruction with you. Do you prefer that?"

Durward cradled his head in his hands. Finch-Starrett had him trapped. It was despicable to pay a bribe to clear his name — but Finch-Starrett was right, it wouldn't be hard to touch off a panic in DV stock that would bring him crushing losses and wipe out many small investors who had trustingly placed their faith in him.

And all for two nights spent in the arms of a golden-haired stripper.

Julie, Julie, you warned me! And I wouldn't listen. I said we'd fight for our love against the world. But how can one fight Finch-Starrett? All's fair to him. I can't descend to his level.

He felt his soul breaking on the wheel.

Finch-Starrett said, "You can think about it, if you like. You have time. I want a certified draft for seventy thousand quid in my hands by nine o'clock Monday morning. If I don't have it, you'll have to face what-

ever consequences may come."

Durward nodded. He fought back the temptation to reach out, to take the thin throat in his hands, to crash the side of his hand against the protruding adams-apple. He wanted to crush Finch-Starrett under his heel, like the vermin he was. But no; violence wasn't the answer, he thought.

There was no answer.

Durward rose slowly.

"I'll — think about it, Finch-Starrett."

"Monday morning at nine. I can't wait past then. I'll have to begin selling short."

"I'll think it over," Durward said, his voice a barely audible mumble. He walked out of the club, one step at a time, mechanical, a figure of steel and wires now, not of flesh and blood.

Night had fallen. It was after seven. He went to the parking lot, got in his car, simply sat at the wheel without turning the key. A deadly inertia gripped him.

He was caught in a devilish trap.

Finch-Starrett could destroy him, that was clear. A carefully planned campaign could blast the value of DV shares to nothing overnight. He'd still be left well off — he had real estate holdings, debt securities, other things that wouldn't be affected — but he'd be ruined so far as his career was concerned. There would be no more financial triumphs, no Parliamentary career, no glories in the years to come. At thirty-six he'd be finished, lucky to have the gains of the past years to support him in the empty years ahead.

He shook his head. Impossible to let Finch-Starrett print that story.

But what was the alternative? Seventy thousand

pounds sterling as a bribe? It was gigantic. He could lay hold of the money readily enough.

But where did the exertion end? So long as he went on seeing Julie, Finch-Starrett could work the same deal over and over again. Then days from now, he could present the same typed paragraph and demand another thirty or forty thousand pounds, and get it, too. And two weeks later, fifty thousand more. On and on until he was drained dry and Finch-Starrett a millionaire.

Durward clenched his fists. The only solution he could see was to give Finch-Starrett his filthy money and to stop seeing Julie. That would destroy Finch-Starrett's hold on him. In another week or two, the merger would have been consummated, and his brief indiscretion would fade into history. Nobody could seriously object to a two-day affair; there was a whore or two lurking in almost everybody's background, after all. It was a continued affair, an affair that verged on love, that could stir up trouble.

Durward turned on his car. He drove quickly out of the lot, so tense and jittery that he let the car stall as it reached the street. Gripping the wheel tightly, he started it again, drove carefully now out into the street.

Five hours until midnight.

Will I go to see her? I'll have to, he thought. *Have to tell her about it. She must know. And then -- then will it be goodbye? Will I have the strength to break off? Or will I keep on with it until Finch-Starrett finally destroys me?*

He wondered who had tipped Finch-Starrett off. Quickly, he ran down the list of those who knew about his relationship with Julie.

Julie herself. No, that was absurd.

Puddy Laughton. Puddy was a loyal friend; besides, he was out of town; besides still further, he despised Finch-Starrett. Impossible that Puddy could have told.

Lucien D'amato. A possibility. D'amato had let Puddy find out, after all. And D'amato was weak. Would he have been pliable enough to let himself be probed by Finch-Starrett? D'amato was no fool. He knew the consequences of giving such explosive information to a gossip columnist. And he seemed sincere, honest enough. He wouldn't want any scandals brewed at his own club. He wouldn't want one of his girls to be hurt this way.

Yet D'amato was the only one who might have spilled it. Nobody else knew the secret, so far as Durward was aware. Had Puddy lightheartedly told someone? Had Julie been careless? Or was it D'amato?

It mattered very little now, Durward thought dully. He couldn't undo the damage. Someone had ratted on him, and the price he would have to pay was high, financially, ethically, emotionally. He hated bribery. It was shattering to find himself a party to such a scheme. But he had to save himself, to save his corporation, to save the merger.

He drove aimlessly about London, feeling like a man already ruined. It was clear to him now that he had no choice but to pay Finch-Starrett his bribe, forget Julie, and hope for the best. It meant a compromise with himself. It meant a violation of his own integrity. But the alternatives were too dreadful to consider.

He parked by the Thames, near the Embankment, and walked to the edge, looking down into the dark, swirling river. The massive shapes of Parliament and Scotland Yard yawned up behind him. He looked down-

river, at the bridges. All he had to do was drive down to the next bridge and leap off, into the darkness.

No.

Impossible, he thought. He was surprised at himself even for considering such an act. He wasn't capable of suicide, not now or at any time. Everything in him cried out that he had to stay, to face the music.

He walked on in a wide circle, up the Embankment nearly to Charing Cross, then back down the majestic sweep of Whitehall to his car. The slow, prowling walk took him more than an hour, but, even so, it was far too early. There were hours yet before he could see Julie. The second show had only just begun at the Merriment. She was up there on stage, stepping out of her bra and panties, showing her breasts to the appreciative audience, waggling her lovely buttocks at them —

I must have been insane, he thought, *to fall in love with that sort of girl. Yes, temporary insanity. What could I have been thinking of? I might just as well have deliberately set out to blacken my own name.*

But, he realized, getting into his car once again, he was being unfair and irrational. Julie *wasn't* the sort of girl Finch-Starrett and the rest took her for. That was the irony of the situation. She was being damned without a trial, and he was being consigned to damnation along with her. By righteous puritanical do-gooders who weren't above grabbing off a bit of the same themselves when they thought nobody would be looking.

Durward started the car and drove slowly up away from the river, toward Soho. He parked within two blocks of the Merriment, but did not go in. Instead, he wandered along Wardour Street, in a dismal, black frame

of mind.

A pub at the next corner beckoned. Durward went in. A few drinks would help him kill time until the evening had passed. And the drinks would be cheaper here than at the Merriment lounge. He smiled bleakly. A man facing the prospect of financial ruination has to be careful what he spends, he thought. No more five-bob brandies for a while, till the situation gets clarified.

He sat down and the barmaid came over to him. She was a girl of about twenty, with straw-colored hair, narrow, squinting eyes, and an impressive bust. Her blouse was drawn so tight Durward thought her buttons would burst. Dark sweat-rings stained the blouse at the armpits.

"Sir?"

"Pint of bitters," Durward said.

She drew it for him, not without taking a deep breath to show off her bust development. She seemed interested in him, as though it were not every night that a well-dressed stranger came into the bar. She had quite a bust, too, Durward thought. Big heavy breasts that jutted out steeply. A pity her face was so scraggly, with its squinting eyes and uneven teeth and thin lips. With any luck in the way of a face, she could have done much better for herself than being a barmaid. Though no doubt there'd be plenty interested in her who'd manage not to look any higher than her throat.

Business was slow in the pub. Durward sipped his beer, finishing it quickly. The barmaid was off to one side, her back to him. He seemed to be the only customer in this part of the pub.

"I'll have another," he said.

She turned, giving him a snaggle-toothed smile.

What she had been doing with her back turned, he saw, was unbuttoning the top two buttons of her blouse. Now ripe white meat swelled into the open. Either she was wearing no bra at all or else just a half-bra, Durward thought. He took a quick, surprised look at the heavy curves of her exposed breasts, and then self-consciously jerked his gaze upward. She smiled and drew the beer for him.

She brought it over. As she set it down, she leaned forward at a precarious angle, and her blouse fell away from her body, and despite himself Durward took a good look. She wasn't wearing a bra. He could see just about everything, the outcurving pears of her big breasts, the reddish-brown nodes of her nipples, even a bit of the undercurve. She let him stare for a moment, then leaned back again.

In a confidential voice she said, "You ain't a scout from one of them strip clubs up the block, by any chance, are you?"

Durward smiled. "What makes you say that?"

"Just wondering. You being so prosperous-looking and all. I know there's a lot of scouts around. Trying to find girls for the shows. And here I am right in the back yard, like, and nobody's found me."

Durward drained half his glass. "You want to be a stripper, eh?"

"Oh, cor, yes! A stripper like that Julie Kent. You know how much she makes?"

"Can't guess."

"Two hundred quid a week, that's what!"

"Oh, I doubt that," Durward said mildly. "It's not half that much."

"How would *you* know?" the girl demanded. "You

ain't answered me, yet. You ain't a scout for one of them strip shows, by any chance?"

Durward licked beer-foam from his lips. "I know the manager of the Merriment."

Now why'd I say that? he wondered. *It's true, but why get involved?*

The girl's eyes lit up. Then she shook her head. "You're just putting me on!"

"His name's Lucien D'amato, and he's a friend of mine." Durward insisted.

She leaned closer. "You don't think maybe you could give me a recommend, eh?"

"What's your name?"

"Daphne Simms, sir." Her plain face had taken on a kind of glow. "I been to the Merriment a couple of times for tryouts, but they turned me away on account of I'm not very pretty in the face. But that don't matter, do it? Nobody ever looks at a girl's face up there. And I got a good body." She glanced around, saw that there was nobody else near them in the pub, and opened a third button. Her breasts were practically tumbling out of her blue blouse now. "Size 38, that's what, and it ain't all shoulderblades, neither. Take a good look. I got more, too." Her voice was a low, throaty, almost comical murmur. "Tell you what. There's a room in back, the barmaids use it to sit down in. It locks. Meet me back there and I'll give you a good look. You can decide if you want to let me have a recommend to D'amato or not."

Durward had a third pint of beer. By now he was feeling quite light-headed; he had had virtually nothing to eat all day except for Julie's omelet, and he had consumed a good deal of Finch-Starrett port before begin-

ning to fill up on beer.

He realized he was getting quite drunk. His cheeks were rosy, his eyes blurred. The girl poured persuasion in his ears. After his fourth pint of beer in little more than twenty minutes, he agreed to come back and "audition" her in the rear room.

"I'm taking five," she called to the other barmaid, who was serving at the opposite end of the room. Then she disappeared through a rear door. Durward waited, his brain fuzzy, counting out sixty seconds. Then he followed her. He went past the men's W.C., the women's, and came to a third door marked *Employees Only*.

He pushed it open.

Daphne was standing there in the nude. Her clothes were in a heap around her, and she was flushing bright red from her cheeks down to her full breasts, but she was stripped bare.

"Shove the bolt," she whispered urgently.

He bolted the door and entered. He looked at her.

She was right. Below the neck, she had a superb body. Heavy breasts quivered gently, well-formed breasts unmarred by prominent veins. Her belly was gently rounded, her navel deep, her hips abundant, her thighs firm. She had a magnificently sensual body atop which nature, in a fiendish prank, had stuck a head that belonged on some withered spinster.

"Well?" she asked. "It's tip-top, isn't it? You don't notice m'face at all, do you?"

"N-no."

"And it's all real. Come here. Lay hold. I don't mind, dearie."

He remained where he was, and so she had to come toward him. She took his hands and put them on her

breasts. He let them rest there, feeling the warm heavy masses of flesh against his palms, the nipples jutting upward like little rocks. She pushed herself up against him, moving her hips from side to side.

"You feeling okay, dearie?" she asked solicitously. "You look kinda baddish just now."

"I'm — all right —"

"Come on, then. Let's have a bit of fun, and then you can ring up your friend D'amato for me — I don't need two hundred quid a week, just twenty, that's enough for a starter, eh? Just for a starter."

She was up against him, breathing hard, a bitch in heat, magnificent in her full-fleshed nakedness, and he could smell the sweat of her, and the woman-smell, the musky odor rising from those mammoth naked breasts of hers, and she was fumbling around with him now, with her avid fingers, trying to give him the best time she knew how.

She was edging him toward the couch, now. He felt her fingers on him. His breath was starting to come in lustful gusts. She was pushing him down onto the couch, sitting down straddling him, lowering herself onto him, impaling herself, and smiling, smiling, as she rocked back and forth, and everything was warm and soft, and Durward felt surcrease from all trouble, all anguish, just sitting here with his hands on those big breasts while this barmaid rocked back and forth over him, her fleshy thighs dangling down over his.

Suddenly a thin voice said somewhere in the room, "So, Durward! Not only do you consort with strippers, you play with barmaids as well! Quite the degenerate, eh? I shall have to add a paragraph more to my next column."

"Finch-Starrett!" Durward gasped. "How in hell's name did you get in here —?"

"Quiet, dearie," the girl said. "You'll get me sacked, shouting like that."

"Just remain like that another moment," Finch-Starrett's voice went on. "I'll have the photographers here to record it, and Sir Ronald will see the shot on Tuesday —"

In sudden anguish Durward felt the explosion of fulfillment within him. He grew bright red as his body shook. The moment it was over, he stood up abruptly. The girl, unsatisfied and bewildered, toppled backward, landing heavily on her bare buttocks, and lay there with her knees in the air.

"Hey, there!" she said. "What kind of a trick is that? Right in the middle of—"

"Got to get out of here," Durward muttered.

"You gone crackers or something?"

He looked around the room, panicky. No one in it. No Finch-Starrett. Not even a loudspeaker.

All his imagination.

You're starting to crack up, he thought.

He adjusted his clothing. The girl scrambled to her knees.

"Hey, where you going?"

"Away."

"You can't get a girl all heated up and then just dump her, you know. Come back! You blighter, you had yours, why not me?"

"Sorry. Got to get out." Durward muttered in terror. His quivering fingers fumbled with the bolt on the door. The girl crawled toward him, her enormous breasts swaying, her face even uglier now in its surprise

and anger.

"You're going t'call D'amato about me, remember? The name's Simms. Daphne Simms, I work at the Oak and Elm. Don't forget, now!"

He got the door open.

"Oh, you filthy bastard," she called after him. "I bet you don't even know him! You just wanted to take advantage of an innocent girl! And not even give her good measure for it!"

Durward did not reply. He burst out into the corridor, raced through the nearly deserted bar, out into the street. Like a wild man, he sped up Wardour Street until he reached his car.

He got in and huddled behind the wheel, drenched with sweat, his mind knotted and confused. Vivid against his brain's screen was the picture of the barmaid, crouching on the floor, her legs still spread, her unsatisfied loins staring up at him, her big breasts heaving wildly. He felt exhaustion.

What's happening to me? he asked himself feverishly. *Getting drunk—being seduced by an ugly barmaid—having hallucinations—*

Dry sobs racked him. Was this the beginning of a complete deterioration, he wondered? Did he go on from here to a long and sordid downfall? He shook with fright for the first time in his adult life. Four pints of beer, a quick conversation, five minutes of sweaty lust in a back room, then the illusion, the *de*lusion. He could still smell the girl's odor. He could still feel the warmth of her grasping him, sliding back and forth over him. Nightmare, he thought. A nightmare just beginning, perhaps.

With far worse to come.

CHAPTER TWELVE

DURWARD SAT QUIETLY IN THE CAR a long while, until he had calmed down. The effects of the beer had burned away in his panicky flight, and now he felt hollow and hungry inside. His head throbbed. He couldn't remember when he had last felt this forlorn, this helpless. For more years than he could count, he had been master of his own destiny, and suddenly he had a knife held to his throat, and he was going to pieces.

He looked at his watch. Ten minutes to ten. The evening had fled.

Time to go to the Merriment, he thought. He had killed enough hours now.

He locked up the car and walked leaden-footed down the street, into the club. The woman in the box office smiled at him, said, "Next show won't be on for nearly an hour, you know."

"I know," he said. He gave her a pound note, found a shilling in his pocket, put it down. He went inside, signed his name in the book, pocketed his membership card.

He went into the lounge. The waiter came over to inquire if he'd care for a drink.

Durward shook his head. "Nothing to drink. I'd like to talk to Mr. D'amato."

"I'll see if he's around, sir. You're—ah—Mr. Durward, is it?"

"That's right."

He smiled grimly as the waiter moved off. In just a few days, Durward thought, he had become a regular here. Even the waiters knew him by name.

D'amato appeared, rubbing his hands. "So pleased to see you, Mr. Durward. It is always an honor and a delight when you—"

"Sit down," Durward said.

D'amato, frowning, took a seat. He peered at Durward and said, "You don't look well, Mr. Durward."

"I don't feel well. I feel damn sick to my stomach, as a matter of fact."

"Perhaps you'd like to come into my office—to lie down—I'll have the house doctor look you over—"

Durward shook his head. "I'll survive," he said gruffly. "Listen to me, D'amato. What did you tell Finch-Starrett when he was here Friday night?"

"I tell him? Nothing. He asks me a few simple questions about the club, I answer them. That's all."

"You're sure that's all?"

"Absolutely!" D'amato looked unhappy. "You are forever browbeating me, Mr. Durward. Why are you so suspicious of me? I am an honest man, I run an honest club here. Yet you storm in accusing me of I do not know what. Please, relax. Have a drink. Tell me what is troubling you."

"I don't want a drink."

"Why are you so—agitated?" D'amato asked in a soft, concerned voice.

Durward stared at the strip-club proprietory's pudgy, gentle face for a long moment, wondering whether he should accept D'amato's goodness as the reality or as a mask for deep conniving macchiavellianism. At length Durward said, in a slow, halting voice, "Finch-Starrett knows about my romance with Julie."

"You are joking!"

"I wish I were. He requested the pleasure of a meeting with me a few hours ago, and he showed me an advance draft of what he's going to print about me and Julie in the Monday evening edition," Durward said leadenly.

D'amato said, "He will not dare!"

"He will dare. Unless I buy him off."

"He is blackmailing you?" D'amato asked incredulously.

"Very handsomely. It's a sum big enough to buy a fleet of Rolls-Royces. And the alternative's even worse. He can wreck me commercially if he prints it."

D'amato's face was white, his expression oddly ferocious. "I will stop him from doing this to you! I will not let a friend be blackmailed!"

"There isn't much you can do, I'm afraid."

"Never you mind that. I will do what I can, and I will stop him."

Durward thumbed his eyeballs wearily. "How'd he find out about it, anyway? Who told him?"

"This I do not know. He snooped around, asking many people many questions. But I know my people here. They are not talkative. They can keep confidences."

"Someone told him."

"I will find it out," D'amato promised. "And I will punish. You can be certain, I will punish heavily."

"That won't help me much," Durward said.

D'amato clenched pudgy fists. "I will take care of this Finch-Starrett! I will show him not to persecute my friends!" D'amato rose. "When he is printing this?"

"Monday."

"He will not print it." D'amato started to walk away.

Durward said, "Oh, D'amato."

"Yes?"

"One other thing. There's a girl I met tonight who wants to work here. Made me promise I'd give you her name. It's Daphne Simms. She's a barmaid down the street at the Oak and Elm. Rather plain face, but a spectacular body. Give her a trial, will you?"

D'amato grinned. "As a special favor to you?"

"Yes."

"All right. I send for her. Daphne Simms, the Oak and Elm." Turning, D'amato stumped off toward his office.

Durward felt a bit cheered. He was certain now that D'amato had not been responsible for informing Finch-Starrett. But who, then? Definitely not Puddy Laughton; certainly not Julie. Which left no one at all.

Maybe he's guessing.

Was it all a bluff? Did he really have any proof, or was he simply faking? Durward wondered. Somehow he doubted it. The stakes were too big for a bluff. After all, suppose Finch-Starrett had guessed wrong, and there was no affair. He'd be caught in a devilish fix, then. No, Finch-Starrett had proof, Durward decided. Otherwise he'd never have dared to act the way he had.

Heavy-hearted, Durward decided to go down behind stage to visit with Julie. He had to tell her about this, to find out how she felt, what she knew. There was time, yet, before the next show began. Time enough to begin talking over where they must move from here.

Durward entered the passageway that led to the dressing-rooms. He was halfway back there when he heard the sound of high feminine voices, quarrelling.

"Dirty sneaking bitch!"

"Cheap whore!"

"Tramp! Liar! Meddler!"

He stepped up his pace. The door to Julie's dressing-room stood open, and Durward saw a startling sight as he peered in.

Julie and the other star stripper, the brunette Lola, both of them naked, standing face to face, the tips of their full breasts practically touching, as they called each other names. Neither of them noticed him at all.

"Pig!"

"Slut!"

"Tart!"

"Lying whore!"

Lola's hand lashed out. It cracked across Julie's cheek, leaving a livid stain. Julie reacted instantly, leaping forward, catching Lola's long black hair, pulling.

A crowd began to gather in the corridor behind Durward, who stood stock-still, watching the fight as though transfixed and immobile.

Julie tugged mercilessly at Lola's hair. Lola brought her knee up into Julie's stomach, and Julie doubled up, Durward gasping with vicarious pain. But she recovered quickly, whirling, seizing Lola's big breasts in her hands, squeezing. Lola howled in agony. Her hands raked out, sought for Julie's hair, grabbed hold. For a moment the two women stood frozen, Julie cruelly squeezing Lola's breasts while Lola tugged at Julie's hair. Then Julie let go of the breasts and pried the brunette's hands away from her hair.

The two women circled each other, panting, sweat-shiny. No one made a move to interfere. Julie's breasts rose and fell rapidly. Lola, the red marks of Julie's fingers on her heavy breasts, crouched as though to spring.

Then she did spring.

She launched herself at Julie's middle and the two women careened to the floor, knocking over a chair. To Durward's dismay, Lola seemed to come out on top. She had spun Julie completely over.

The milky-white globes of Julie's bare buttocks were upturned. Julie writhed madly, trying to break free, as Lola held her and, laughing triumphantly, brought the flat of her hand down with stinging impact on the tender fleshy spheres. Julie kicked her legs in pain. Again and again the hand descended, until Julie's pale buttocks were an angry red. Lola's eyes were wild with pleasure as she continued the sadistic beating.

Still Durward could not move. He was rooted to the spot.

Nearly two dozen blows had fallen on Julie's bare buttocks by now. In another moment, the blood would flow. But then, abruptly, the tide shifted. Reaching out somehow, Julie got her hand wedged between Lola's legs. She clawed with demonic intensity. Lola screamed, her legs flying apart as Julie's fingers raked her. A moment later Julie had catapulted to her feet and, flinging herself at Lola, knocked her over.

Now Julie was on top. She had Lola pinned down on her side, crouching on top of her, pressing her down with her knees. Durward stared at the spectacle of these two naked sweat-shiny beauties, now marked with scratches and bruises, Lola's breasts reddened and angry, Julie's buttocks even more inflamed.

"Damn — lousy — bitch —" Julie muttered. She had her hands knotted in Lola's long hair, and she was lifting Lola's head, cracking it against the floor of the dressing-room. Up — down — *crack*. Twice.

Lola went slack. Her struggles stopped.

Durward finally managed to break free of the stasis that had riveted him to his spot. As Julie lifted Lola's limp head for a third bash against the floor, Durward made his way into the dressing room.

"Stop it!" he ordered. "Do you want to kill her, Julie? If you haven't already!"

"Yes! Yes, I want to kill her!" Julie cried.

Durward scarcely recognized the Julie he knew. Her face was like that of some wild beast. He knelt, grasped her wrists, forced her to let go of Lola's hair. The brunette stripper stirred and moaned. At least she wasn't dead, Durward thought in relief. What a vicious fight that had been, though!

He drew the naked Julie to one side. It didn't

seem as though any permanent damage had been inflicted. There were no teeth missing, no bones broken. Both girls bore a number of scratches. Lola was in poorer shape. She sat up dazedly, one hand rubbing her breasts, the other stroking her loins where Julie's fingers had gouged her. Julie stared menacingly at Lola for a moment, then swivelled to examine the damage to her buttocks.

D'amato was pushing his way through the crowd of onlookers now. He entered, while Durward stood poised between the two combatants to prevent any resumption of hostilities that might occur.

"Here, here." D'amato cried. "What's been going on back here? Some sort of fight?"

"Quite a fight," Durward said, awed.

"What's the story?"

Julie pointed a trembling finger at the still shaky Lola, who had not fully recovered consciousness. "D'y' know what that one did?" Julie demanded hotly, addressing both Durward and D'amato. "She told Finch-Starrett about us! She told him everything."

"What?" Durward said.

"She did?" D'amato said thickly. He closed the door to the dressing-room, blotting out the crowd of onlookers in the corridor. He walked over to Lola, standing above her as she slumped dazedly on the floor. "What is the story here?" D'amato demanded again.

"I tell him," Lola said. "He ask questions, I tell him the story."

Julie's eyes blazed. "She was bragging about it, Howard! When I came backstage after my act, she told me right to my face that she'd spilled everything to Finch-Starrett. Last night, when he was here!"

"But — why?" Durward asked, mystified.

"Yes. Tell us why," D'amato said. His gentle face was purpling with anger. He prodded the naked brunette with the point of his shoe and said, "Is all this true, Lola? Why did you do it?"

The girl shook her head dazedly and rubbed her bruised breasts again. "I do it because — because I am jealous. Jealous of her! I hate her!"

"Why?" Durward asked.

"She is new, she comes in, all of a sudden she is the big attraction here. Lola is forgotten. Lola is nobody overnight. They no longer come here to see Lola, they come to see *her*. Not Lola."

"But how in hell's name could squealing to Finch-Starrett make you the big hit here?" D'amato said, exasperated.

Lola continued to massage her breasts without looking up. Sullenly she said, "I am so jealous. She is the one who has the millionaire for the lover. She is the one all the excitement comes to. I hate her, I hate her millionaire. I want to hurt her! Hurt both of them!"

"I'll scratch her stinking eyes out." Julie blazed.

Durward's hand brushed Julie's thigh, holding her back as she tensed to spring at Lola once again.

Lola said, "Last night, this reporter comes around. He begins talking to me, he wants to know if anything interesting is happening here. Who is dating the girls, he asks. I say there is someone important seeing our new stripper, and he says, he'll give me ten pounds if I tell, and he holds out the money, and I take it, and I say, he is Howard Durward. I see him here backstage, he goes into the dressing-room, he kisses her, they leave together one night. He is very pleased, he gives me a hug. He

says he will destroy Durward in his newspaper column, destroy Julie as well. Then he leaves."

"Is that all?" D'amato asked.

"That is all."

"Very well," D'amato said in a stony voice. "Pack up your things and get your ruddy arse out of here, Lola. You're fired. I'll have your pay ready for you in half an hour, and I don't want to see you around here again."

The girl began to sob.

"Hold on," Durward said. "Aren't you being a little harsh on the girl?"

D'amato stared at him. "She betrays you, she nearly claws Julie to death, she upheaves the whole operation here, and you defend her?"

"She didn't realize what she was starting. She was just getting a handsome tip for giving a newsman a bit of gossip," Durward said.

Lola looked up at him hopefully. D'amato said, "I can't have sneaks working here. I can't let a gossipmonger back here. She'll have to go."

"I ask you to reconsider," Durward said.

"You can't be serious."

"I am. Finch-Starrett's the dangerous one, not Lola. If she'll give you her word not to talk to any reporters ever again — "

"And what am I to do with Julie?" D'amato asked. "As soon as I turn my back, they'll be fighting again. How can we have strippers with scratches and bruises? No, sorry. The girl can't stay. Clear out, Lola."

The girl got to her feet. She turned to Durward, putting her hands over her breasts in a gesture that might have been one of modesty but which was prob-

ably a reaction to the pain she felt in them.

She smiled sadly. "I am grateful to you anyway. And so very sorry. I was a fool — I should not have done it — I did not realize I would hurt you — "

"You've made a lot of trouble for me, Lola. But I suppose it's not your fault, really," Durward said.

"You are so kind."

D'amato grew impatient. Thwacking his hand across her bare buttocks, he said, "Come on, out with you. Pack up, put some clothing on, get out!"

Lola left, shoulders slumped, breasts drooping in dejection. D'amato turned to Julie and surveyed her with the clinical, impartial eye of an art critic. "Your behind's all red. Scratches on your sides and thighs. And the show's only fifteen minutes away. You won't be able to go on, that's certain." He sighed. "All right. I can't show you when you're battered like this. Take her home, Durward. I'll patch together some kind of show without the two of them. I'll see you Monday at the usual time, Julie. And you, Durward — don't worry about Finch-Starrett."

D'amato went out. Julie collapsed onto the stool of her dressing-table and put her head in her hands. Great sobs racked her body, making her breasts quiver and heave. Durward stood above her, one hand lightly resting on her shoulder. He was wordless a long moment.

"Julie," he said finally. "Julie, look at me."

She glanced up out of reddened, watery eyes.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

"Just bruised. Nothing serious, not even where she spanked me. Oh, Howard, Howard, what's going to happen now? Everything's ruined!"

"Perhaps. Perhaps no."

"But Finch-Starrett knows about us. And he was the one you were so worried about. I'm sure he's going to print the story! Howard, maybe you can see him, maybe you can force him not to print anything.

"I've already seen Finch-Starrett," Durward said in a quiet voice.

"You have? When?"

"About six-thirty this evening. He phoned me at home, asked to see me. We met at his club." Slowly, tiredly, he repeated the details of his unpleasant conversation with the newspaperman. The paragraph that had been written, the bribe, the threat.

Pale, Julie looked up at him, her hands clasped tensely between her thighs. "But that's terrible, Howard! If I had known all that, I'd have *killed* Lola!"

"Lola had no idea what she was starting," Durward said. "She was just retailing a bit of gossip. Picking up an easy tenner, that was all."

"And now — that terrible bribe — or else the story in the papers — "

"It's a mess," Durward said. "The bastards are going to get us after all. I'm afraid. We tried to break the rules, and the bastards are going to chop us down for it. At least we tried. At least we tried."

"Do you regret it, Howard?"

"Not a bit of it."

"But everything's gone to smash, now."

He shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not." Patting her back consolingly, he said, "Come, now. Put your clothes on, let's get out of here, as long as you're being let off early tonight. And we can walk out the front way, together, tonight. There's no need to go sneaking around any more. That's one advantage of being exposed."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

HE HAD PLANNED THIS TO BE A BIG NIGHT, the prelude to the entire delicious day they would have together tomorrow, but the events of the evening had put a thorough damper on their spirits.

Durward had put a fifth of champagne in the refrigerator before leaving. He had hoped to make it a really joyful midnight. He told Julie about it now.

"I don't want any," she said. Her face was beginning to get puffy here and there, the aftermath of the fight. Her lower lip was swollen, and one cheek.

"It'll cheer you up," he insisted.

"Like champagne at a funeral?"

"Come on, things aren't that bad!"

"They are, Howard. No use pretending they aren't. Things are dreadful."

"What's seventy thousand pounds, really?" he said, in what he knew was a terribly heavy-handed way of trying to be lighthearted. "Come on, I'll open the champagne. Even if you don't, *I* want some. And it'll go flat if you don't help me down it all."

He went into the kitchen. She followed reluctantly behind him, walking in a defeated slouch. He opened the fridge, took out the champagne.

"See? I've even chilled the glasses."

"Howard, I don't feel like having any. What are we doing, *celebrating?*"

"We need a pickup. Now, observe. To open a bottle of champagne, you hold the cork, twist the bottle. See? As thus. Never any trouble, that way." The cork popped with a small pfutting sound. He poured champagne into each of the two open-mouthed glasses before him, put the bottle into the bucket, handed one of the glasses to her.

"I told you I don't want any."

"Go on. Please. For me."

She looked at him for a long moment, and he smiled at her, and she managed a sad smile and finally took the glass from him.

"That's the way," he said. "Now Keep smiling. Remember that we still have each other, no matter what adversity strikes. Got that? Good. Now. Raise your glass. Here's to us, my darling. To us."

He touched his glass to hers, and put it to his mouth. The champagne was the best in his cellars, the last of the '52 he had laid down, and it was tinglingly

good. He drank it off rapidly, savoring it. Julie sipped at it, swallowed about half, then shook her head and put the glass down on the cupboard.

"It's no use. You have to feel jubilant to drink champagne, and I don't feel that way. Not at all."

"You mustn't take on this way, Julie! As I said, it's only seventy thousand pounds. Mere money, that's — "

"But it *isn't* only mere money, don't you see, Howard?" she said, with sudden anmaton. "It means the end for us, that's what it does!"

"No."

"It has to. Listen, Finch-Starrett's no fool. Do you think he'll settle for a mere seventy thousand? He'll go on, extorting more and more from you, holding the constant threat of exposure over your head. Do you mean to say you haven't thought of that?"

He nodded wearily. "Yes. I have."

"Then how can you say we still have each other? We don't. You'll have to stop seeing me!"

"I won't give you up!"

She shook her head. "You're thinking like a child, Howard. Finch-Starrett will drain away every pound you have, if you let him. And sooner or later the news will get out anyway, and you'll be ruined. I'm not worth it, Howard. You'll be penniless. Your company will fail, you'll be driven into debt. There isn't a woman in the world worth giving up so much for!"

"There's one. You."

"I won't let you," she said. "I'd rather part from you forever than go on living with you, knowing I'd dragged you down to destruction. How can we stay in love? How can we go on for any time, with my guilt

and your resentment? Oh, you talk about love, but love wears off rapidly. And there'll be nothing but hatred left, Howard. Hatred! So what will you gain? You'll have lost everything — and you'll have only me, and you'll hate me."

He shrugged dully. "Drink your champagne," he said.

"There's no future for us."

"We'll see about that. Drink your champagne."

They settled down on the couch, and, despite herself, Julie began to drink. But a bleak mood pervaded them both. She was right, of course; there was no future for them. He had seen that hours earlier, but he had not wanted to be the one to say it, and now she had put his thoughts into unanswerable words.

The champagne did little to relax them. It took away some of the cutting edge of tension, but did not leave in its place any feeling of lightheartedness. Silently, sitting well apart on the couch, they brought their glasses to their lips again and again and again, until the champagne bottle stood empty and inverted in the bucket, and neither of them was the littlest bit intoxicated.

Julie said finally, breaking a silence that had threatened to be endless, "Let's not deceive ourselves any more, Howard. What are you going to tell Finch-Starrett on Monday morning?"

"That he can have his miserable seventy thousand."

"And afterward?"

"When, afterward?"

"Afterward with me. Are we going to go on?"

"I don't know."

"I won't let you, Howard. I'll leave you. I love

you, but I won't let you ruin yourself for my sake."

"You really mean that."

"Of course I do."

He smiled grimly. "Then we shan't see each other past Monday. It's simple, isn't it? You'll fade into my past, and Finch-Starrett will have no further axe to hold over my head, and the merger will go through, and I'll live a blameless life thereafter, and — *no*. Dammit, I can't. I can't just blot you out of my life as though — as though we'd never met. It's impossible."

"You'll have to, Howard."

"No."

He reached for her, with sudden blind anguished need. The champagne was getting to him all at once, rushing madly to his head, and he no longer wanted to argue, no longer wanted to use words at all, but simply wanted to quench his anguish in the cool fountain of love, wanted to hold her tight, to cling to her and test her reality and pretend that all the rest were but phantoms and nightmares.

She came into his arms willingly enough. Their kiss was a searing frantic thing, lips crushing against lips, tongues probing mouths in an eager quest. Together they rose from the couch, stumbled into the bedroom still locked in a tight embrace.

They undressed each other frantically, almost desperately. Clothes flew in every direction. Within moments, they were both naked. They faced each other, Durward's eyes noting the injuries of the fight, and then he reached out for her, taking her breasts, clasping his hands over them, letting the stiffening nipples protrude between two of his fingers, and he moved the great globes of flesh around, while she smiled and then

panted and gasped. Then he kissed each rigid nipple, and the valley between her breasts, and then he turned her about, and gravely and solemnly kissed her rear cheeks, still reddened and sore from the spanking she had received.

"Does it hurt when I touch you there?"

"It's soothing. Do it again."

He did. She turned, then, cradling his head against the rising roundness of her stomach, and he kissed her, and playfully brushed the tip of his nose on her stomach, and then he began to roam with his lips, kissing her, until she began to quiver with excitement and eagerness.

They settled on the bed, stretching out side by side, and she drew him close, but he was not ready yet, and he remembered with a crimson surge of guilt the wild drunken scramble in the back room of that pub just off Wardour Street, when in his confusion he had let himself be taken by that barmaid. And now his body was unable to react.

But Julie took care of that. He lay on his back and she moved to him, rubbing her breasts into his chest, then slithering down, and he felt the touch of her lips and he began to sigh, and stroked her blonde hair with pleasure, and then there was the sensation of readiness, and she looked up at him and smiled, and he smiled back, closing his eyes in ecstasy as she began to kiss him again.

Then she was back at his lips and he felt her moving within, the muscles quivering, and he put his hands up to caress the fullness of her breasts as they swayed above him. They remained that way a few moments, and then she tumbled off his knees onto her side, and he turned too, so that their bodies remained locked still

together, and he moved at her and she met his movement.

Then it was happening, the slow steady upsweeping convulsion of passion, overtaking both of them at once, and it was happening so soon that they fought to hold it back, but there *was* no holding it back.

It took her first, and then, at the height of her ecstasy, it took him too, and it was over for him rapidly, a sudden hammering quintuple surge of power and throbbing release, but it was still going on for her, and he kept moving, feeling the way her body was shaking to its roots, and second stretched into second and he held her tight while she went through the slowdown of the thunderous ecstasy.

After that they lay together in each other's arms a long while, neither waking nor sleeping, suspended in a half-world, an afterglow of relaxation and peace in which no enemies could intrude. As the minutes passed, the spell slowly ebbed.

They began to talk to one another, to talk of love, of how their love would last forever. At that moment it seemed that there would be no tomorrow, indeed that there was no world beyond the four walls of their bedroom. There was only warmth and softness and peace. Her hands stroked his back, and he ran his fingertips over the injured beauty of her buttocks, and all the while the bond of flesh still held them, remaining in place after the fierce storm of their passion had passed.

"Will you always love me?" Julie asked, much later, when sleep drew near.

"Always."

"No matter what happens?"

"No matter what."

"Do you promise?"

"I promise," she said.

She smiled and closed her eyes again, and then almost immediately she was asleep, her breasts rising and falling in a slow, rhythmical sweep. He wanted to cry out for happiness, just at watching her sleeping this way, so beautiful, so peaceful, a few golden strands of soft hair across her face, and her skin pink and satiny, and her limbs relaxed and lovely and perfect.

Then he thought of Finch-Starrett, and tranquillity vanished.

Dark clouds of despair rolled back over him.

He remembered the conversation he and Julie had had, before the champagne had had its effect. They had both come to the same melancholy conclusion: they would have to part.

Conveniently, they had shoved that conclusion into the back of their minds, while the passion of sex had gripped them. But now the moment of passion had gone, and truth was uppermost.

He reviewed his choices.

Pay Finch-Starrett the bribe and keep on seeing Julie. A certain invitation to an endless series of bribes, and ultimate ruination.

Refuse Finch-Starrett the bribe, and face the consequences. That was an even more definite invitation to ruin, as his financial empire came tumbling down with a mighty crash in a few days' time.

Pay Finch-Starrett his bribe, and stop seeing Julie. That was the only solution that offered any hope of avoiding destruction. But what a cost! He realized that Julie had become part of him, like his arm, like his

leg, like his genital organs. Parting with her now would be like being maimed.

Like being castrated, he thought.

Three choices, and two of them led to bankruptcy and the third to emotional emptiness for the rest of his life. Durward managed a bleak smile. It was a pretty position to be in, wasn't it, he asked himself? And amazing how short a time it had taken him to get here. Just a handful of days, half a week, since Puddy Laughton had suggested that they go over to the Merriment Revue Club for a lark, and a blonde girl had come out on stage and removed her clothes and changed the entire course of a man's life.

Only half a week.

He thought over the choices again and again.

And then, slowly, a fourth solution emerged, one that he had not even considered before, one that the conscious levels of his mind had jammed down into oblivion.

He could kill Finch-Starrett.

Kill Finch-Starrett, and pay no bribe, and have no financial collapse, and Julie would be his. There would be no expose. She would leave the strip club, and as memories faded no one would dare to accuse her with her own past, and in six months' time or so they would announce their engagement. Tongues would wag privately, but such things have a way of never coming out into the open. Marrying a former stripper was not the same as sleeping with a present stripper, either. Society had its odd little rules.

Kill Finch-Starrett, he thought.

He pondered the morality of it. Take a human life? He had done that often enough, in his Army serv-

ice, and hadn't thought of himself as a murderer. It had been sheer self-defense, kill or be killed.

It was the same here, wasn't it? Finch-Starrett was out to destroy him. Why not strike first? Save his company, save Julie, save their love.

It wouldn't even be murder, he thought.

It would be more like an eradication. An extermination. A removal from the face of the earth of an exceptionally odious kind of vermin.

Kill Finch-Starrett.

Yes, he thought. Yes. It was the answer. Tomorrow morning, he would seek the journalist out in his flat, and destroy him. With bare hands, the sudden slice across the adams-apple. as he had thought of earlier this evening. It had only been a murderous fantasy then; now it was almost reality.

What if I'm caught?

Try not to be, he told himself. Arrive quietly, perform the execution, leave. No fingerprints, no bloody weapons to dispose of. Scotland Yard wouldn't come sniffing around a Howard Durward. They'd pick up vagrants and drifters, not an important public figure. So far as anyone knew, there was no motive. Lola might guess at one, but Lola would not speak out a second time, nor would D'amato rise to accuse him. Finch-Starrett had no friends. No one would miss him.

Tomorrow, then. Durward thought.

Tomorrow I kill him. And then all will be well for Julie and me.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HE SLEPT LIGHTLY. Julie woke again, an hour before dawn, and they made love in a dreamy, unreal way, and then she subsided into sleep once more. At eight, Durward quietly left the bed. Julie didn't stir. She was far away, in a deep, unshakable slumber.

So much the better, Durward thought.

Going into his study, he wrote out a little note for her. *Julie: I've gone out on an important business matter. Forgot to tell you about it last night. I'll be back here no later than ten or ten-thirty, provided all goes well.*

He left the note on his pillow, hoping she'd notice

it when she awakened. He dressed, without waking her, and closed the bedroom door.

Finding Finch-Starrett's address was no problem. Durward kept a file of the home addresses of friends and foes, anyone he might want to contact in a hurry over some news development. Finch-Starrett was there. He lived in Brompton, on the south side of the Park, near all the museums. A dreary though not slummy neighborhood, Durward thought. No doubt Finch-Starrett had plans for moving to a more exclusive neighborhood, like Durward's own Mayfair, or Belgrave Square, once he cashed in on Durward's seventy thousand pound bribe.

He took the Rolls. The Jaguar would have been out of key, this early on a Sunday morning in a quiet residential district. Traffic was light enough to justify using the bigger car. And the Jag, he thought, was likely to be more conspicuous. Durward glanced at himself in the rear-view mirror as the big car came to powerful, smoothly-throbbing life. His face was pale, but otherwise did not look at all unusual.

Portrait of a murderer setting out on his morning rounds, Durward thought.

He drove down Park Lane, down to where Piccadilly met Knightsbridge, then made the right turn that took him into Brompton. It was quiet, quiet as the tomb down here. The endless rows of identical houses slumbered. The museums were dark and silent.

He turned into Finch-Starrett's street, which was so hushed it might have been a museum display of a typical London residential street, and not the street itself. He eased the Rolls into a spot near the corner.

Number 77, Beauchamp Place. He glanced at the

house in front of him. Number 63. He kept walking, and the numbers rose.

77. There it was. A gray stone front, the usual Victorian style of architecture, functionless pillars decorating the outbellying front of the building. Careful now, Durward thought. Don't want to run into any of the neighbors. It was a three-story building, and the directory plate out front told him that Finch-Starrett lived on the topmost floor. Durward tried the door to the vestibule, and it opened without his having to ring a bell.

So far, so good.

Up the stairs, now. Quietly, quietly. Not even a creak, please. Past the sleeping neighbors (who ought to be getting up, getting out to church by this time, Durward thought. It's past nine in the morning.)

Second landing. Pause a moment, listen.

All clear.

On to the third floor.

Top of the stairs. A door.

Finch-Starrett's door.

Durward's throat was cottony-dry. He was right at the brink, now. In a few moments, the world would be rid of a nuisance, and he would be free to live and love as he pleased. The relief, the lifting of this heavy burden from his back — it would be worth the risks involved in murder. Durward thought.

He was surprised at his own calmness.

He looked around. Then he knocked at Finch-Starrett's door, gently, not wanting to send the sound of it down through the entire house.

No answer.

Finch-Starrett was still asleep, then. All right. Not surprising.

He knocked again, louder.

Come on, you devil, wake up and answer the door! Wake up and let me kill you!

Durward rehearsed the scene in his mind. Nothing protracted, he thought, nothing drawn out with sneers and hamminess. Just step inside when Finch-Starrett appears, grab him, slam him in the throat with the edge of the hand. A quick stiff karate chop that would crumple his windpipe and send him reeling bluefaced and bugeyed to the floor. Then a quick check to make sure of death, and then, the job done, a rapid exit. Perhaps they wouldn't find Finch-Starrett's putrefying body for months.

Durward knocked again, as loud as he dared.

This time there was an answer, thin-voiced and indistinct and hesitant.

"Come — in — "

Durward frowned. That hadn't been Finch-Starrett's voice.

"Come — in — "

Louder, now, though still shaky. Durward knew the voice.

It was the voice of Lucien D'amato!

Puzzled, Durward tried the handle, found that the door was unlocked. He pushed it inward and stepped inside, finding himself in a sunlit foyer that gave onto a sitting-room piled high with books and manuscripts.

Durward gasped in shock.

D'amato lay sprawled almost at his feet, his body bent at a grotesque angle and held stiffly rigid, as though he had been folded by some giant hand and left to solidify in that position. Across the room from him, lying face down in a weltering pool of blood, was Harold

Finch-Starrett.

D'amato's plump face was grayish. His soft eyes rolled wildly in his head.

A bloody knife lay by the strip-club proprietor's side.

"D'amato! What are you doing here?"

"Came here — last night —" D'amato's voice was a barely audible croak. "Why — why are you here, Durward?"

"Never mind that. What's gone on here?"

D'amato managed a feeble smile. "Came here — after the club closed. To talk with him." Eyeballs rolled toward the bloody figure of Finch-Starrett. "Told you — told you I'd take care he didn't print anything. Didn't really think I'd — have to kill him."

"D'amato!"

"We argued. I told him not to print the piece about you. He refused. We — shouted. Fought. He pulled a knife on me. Dirty buggering swine, pulled a knife. Right out of that desk. Only — only I had a blade too. Ripped his buggering throat open. But — but he got his knife into my back —"

"Good Lord," Durward muttered. He knelt, saw the ragged tear in D'amato's shirt, saw the dark ugly slit going deep into his back.

"Been here all night," D'amato whispered. "Can't move. Must have — must have done something to spine. I pulled the knife out but — but can't move legs or anything now. Getting stiffer. Like stone. Touch me, Durward. Touch my arm."

Durward did. D'amato's eyes closed a moment. "Can't feel it," he said hoarsely. "Can't feel a thing. Can't even shake my head. Getting hard to move my

lips. Can't — can't last much longer. Hard to breathe. Paralysis — all over. Y'think the bugger cut my spine, Durward?"

"We'll get you to hospital right away," Durward said. "Why'd you do it, D'amato? You shouldn't have — risked yourself — "

"Had to. He'd hurt Julie. And you. Couldn't allow that. Couldn't."

Durward chewed savagely at his lip. Crossing the room, he prodded with the tip of his foot at the face-down body of Finch-Starrett until the corpse turned over. Durward shuddered. D'amato had done an expert job. He had slashed a ragged criss-cross into Finch-Starrett's throat, cutting a gaping hole that nearly severed his head, and then had embedded the knife hilt-deep into the journalist's chest. It was still there. Durward drew his foot away, letting the body flop downward again.

The job had been done for him.

"Where's the phone?" Durward asked.

"Next to the window — on the desk —"

Durward nodded. "I'll get an ambulance. We'll get you the best medical care there is, D'amato."

"No — use. Can't last. Chest getting paralyzed now. Won't — won't be able to breathe — hard to talk — like a ruddy claw round my throat — "

Durward spun the telephone's dial.

"Hello. Operator. Operator, listen, there's been a murder and an attempted murder at 77 Beauchamp Place. Yes, in Brompton. I want an ambulance here right away — a man's still alive, but he's critical — yes, get the police too, but first an ambulance — top floor, 77 Beauchamp Place, and hurry it."

He put down the phone.

"No — use — " D'amato wheezed.

Durward knelt over him. The plump man was bizarrely stiffened, now. His facial muscles seemed to have gone out of his control; his cheeks sagged, and there was an idiot's droop to his lips.

"We'll have an ambulance here in a matter of minutes," Durward said. "Just try to keep hanging on, D'amato. You've lasted all night — just a little longer — "

"Can't — "

Durward clenched his fists. There was nothing he could do, nothing but to wait. Here was this man, this gentle man, who had committed the murder another man should have committed, and who had been stabbed himself in the bargain, and had lain here six, seven, eight hours paralyzed, unable to speak above a whisper, unable to move, even to crawl —

"Durward — " came the thick, scarcely intelligible gasp. "Durward — listen — "

"I'm listening, D'amato!"

"Take — take care of Julie — don't ever hurt her — give her the best — the best of everything." A long wheezing pause. "I — loved that girl, Durward. Like — like my own daughter. I loved her. I — "

"D'amato!"

Durward watched, his flesh crawling, as he saw the life leave D'amato. The eyes remained open; apparently even the eyelids no longer responded to the brain's command. But one moment the eyes had been alive, full of pain and suffering, and the next they were calm and inert, two gleaming glassy ovals without life, without sentience. The passage from life into death had been un-

mistakable.

Alone with the two corpses, Durward prowled the room. He walked to Finch-Starrett's desk, and spied a sheet of yellow foolscap that had been folded. It was unfolded now, and Durward looked down and read:

Industrialist Howard Durward "he's top man of Durward Ventures, Ltd., hard-driving take-over outfit" forms half of one of the most ill-assorted twosomes in town these days . . . .

Durward snatched the sheet up in horror. It was all he needed, to have the police find that paper lying out in the open that way, and to begin connecting possible links. He didn't want to be arrested for a murder he hadn't committed. But what to do with the sheet? He couldn't very well burn it without arousing suspicions on the part of some keen-nosed detective.

He carried it into the bathroom, read it through one last time, and began to shred it. When he had ripped it into fragments the size of postage stamps, he threw a handful into the toilet bowl, flushed them away, waited a minute, threw the rest in. That was the end of them. Doubtless Finch-Starrett had a carbon of the passage somewhere in the files, but by the time that came to light, if ever, nobody would think of making the connection, Durward hoped.

He went back into the sitting room.

Minutes later, he heard the sound of sirens, saw an ambulance and a police lorry pulling up in front of the house, as windows began to open all up and down the street and inquisitive heads started to appear.

The ambulance boys were the first ones up the stairs. Durward opened the door and greeted them with, "Sorry, but I'm afraid you're too late."

"Where's the body?"

"Two bodies," Durward said. "This is the man I summoned you about. He died soon after I put in the phone-call."

The ambulance crew swarmed around D'amato and Finch-Starrett. Someone recognized the newspaperman and said, "I knew someone would slit his lousy neck before too many more years went by."

The police came streaming into the room a moment later. Durward tried to remain calm.

He picked out the officer in charge and said, "I'm Howard Durward, officer. I think I can explain some of what's happened here."

The policeman looked at Durward out of squinting eyes. "The fellow who takes over companies, that Durward?"

"That's the one, yes," Durward said.

"Okay. What's the story, then?" He glanced at the bodies. "Both dead, eh?"

"Both dead," one of the ambulance crew said.

Durward moistened his lips and said, "I drove over here about nine this morning to see Mr. Finch-Starrett. I had some important business to discuss with him——something he was supposed to put in his column concerning me."

"Something that had to be talked about at nine o'clock Sunday morning?"

Durward shrugged. "I asked to see him, and that was the time he gave me. But when I got here, I found him dead, and this man paralyzed and dying."

"You know who he is?"

Durward nodded. "He's Lucien D'amato. Owner of the Merriment Revue Club."

The policeman whistled softly. "Go on."

"D'amato said he'd come here after the Merriment closed last night. That would be around one or two in the morning. He told me that he and Finch-Starrett had quarreled and then had fought."

"Over what?"

"He didn't say. I guess Finch-Starrett was going to say nasty things about the Merriment. He was investigating it, you know, for Major Jarrell and the reforming bunch."

A stenographer's pencil scribbled tirelessly.

Durward went on, "According to D'amato, Finch-Starrett pulled a knife. D'amato did the same. They jumped at each other, and D'amato got stabbed in the back, but he managed to slash Finch Starrett's throat, and plant the knife in his heart. Then D'amato staggered over there and fell down, got the knife out of his back, and found he couldn't move the lower half of his body The paralysis increased, and by the time I got here he could barely talk or move his head. He died soon after I arrived."

There were questions. There were questions for an hour or more, as higher police officials arrived when the growing importance of the case became apparent. Durward began to regret that he had not simply slipped away. His name was bound to be mixed into this in the papers, now. It wasn't the sort of publicity a gentleman wanted. He doubted that they'd book him for the actual murder, but the mere fact of his presence here so early on a Sunday morning seemed to arouse a good deal of suspicion.

But he had no choice but to stay around. D'amato had still been alive when he had phoned for help, and

had to be watched. And it would have been very very bad if he had tried to leave the moment of D'amato's death, and had been nabbed by the arriving police.

At the end of an hour's questioning, though, it was decided that they'd had enough from him. They thanked him very kindly, with great deference to his importance and position, and let him go.

Durward felt as though he'd been awake for days. It was only ten minutes of eleven, though. Nervelessly, almost numbly, he drove back to Park Lane.

Julie was still asleep when he entered the bedroom. She stirred, moaned sleepily.

"That you?" she said. "Howard?"

"Yes."

"You went somewhere."

"I'm back now."

She sat up, an enchanting figure in her nudity. Her breasts rose steeply as she put her knuckles to her eyes and yawned.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

Durward managed a faint smile and slipped his jacket off. He sat down on the edge of the bed, letting his hand rest lightly on her bare thigh.

"It's a long story," he said quietly. "A long, long, very surprising story. But we're free from Finch-Starrett, darling. Free for good."

It was Thursday, now.

Harold Finch-Starrett had been unmourned in his grave since Monday afternoon. The newspaper that would have carried the column exposing Howard Durward's illicit affair carried Finch-Starrett's obituary instead.

At his office, at three o'clock Thursday afternoon, Durward put his signature to the articles of agreement covering a merger between Durward Ventures, Ltd., and Dynamic Automation, Ltd. The deal had been worked out yesterday, across the lunch table, in face-to-face confrontation between Durward and Sir Ronald Walters.

Durward had been afraid that the scandal of having been around on the murder morning would ruin the merger. But the publicity had been surprisingly easy-going. There was a good deal of talk, of course, since so important and well-known a figure had been the one to discover the bodies. But he was beyond suspicion, and nobody seemed to question his presence there. The merger had gone off smoothly enough, at the original price. 50,000 shares of DV to be exchanged for the entire capital stock of Dynamic Automation, subject to ratification by the stockholders of both corporations. And said ratification was a foregone conclusion, since the heads of the corporations held controlling interests in their respective firms.

The telephone rang.

"Mr. Martlett calling, sir."

Durward took the call. "Good afternoon, Martlett. What's the news?"

"The news is splendid. DV shares are up one-and-sixpence, and they'll be going higher. The merger is definitely coming off, is it?"

"As definite as anything is in this world, Paul."

"I suppose. Have you heard about the Merriment Club yet?"

"What about it?" Durward said.

"Our friend Puddy is taking it over. He called me a short while ago to arrange for the financing. He's buy-

ing it from the D'amato estate and is going to operate it himself."

"I'll be damned," Durward said. "Puddy's going into business!"

"And wouldn't you know what sort of business," Martlett said, chuckling. "He'll spend more time backstage pinching his stars than anywhere else."

Confirmation of the story came from Laughton himself, a short while later. He sounded overjoyed.

"Everything's all agreed, Howard. I'm taking title on Friday, and we'll reopen the place Saturday night. I do hope you'll be there. I'll give you a life membership, of course. It's the least I can do."

"Well, thank you, Puddy. But I'm afraid I've got a bit of bad news for you."

"Oh?"

"You're going to lose one of your star turns. Julie won't be able to appear at the Merriment any more."

"Why not?" Laughton asked. "I'll give her more than D'amato was paying her! I'll — "

"You can't possibly meet the price," Durward said. "I just won't permit it. It wouldn't be seemly, would it, for the wife of Howard Durward to appear three times a night in a strip club, would it?"

"The wife of — "

"I'm announcing it over the weekend," Durward said. "You can whisper it around, if you like. And let it be known that the future Mrs. Durward's past is never, mark you *never*, to be discussed within her husband's hearing."

"Howard, are you sure this is right? She's a charming girl and all, but won't it touch off a bit of a scandal if you — "

"I don't care," Durward said firmly. "I can sussvive any scandal. Her past will be forgotten. And anyone who drops us socially simply wasn't worth knowing in the first place. Oh, and Puddy — "

"Yes?"

"We're leaving for Spain on Monday. Any souvenirs you'd like us to send you?"

"A dark-haired senorita," Laughton said promptly. He laughed. "Getting married. Good old Durward. I'll be damned. I'll be everlastingly damned!"

"You probably will be," Durward said.

"You'll come around to the old Merriment, won't you? You and your bride?"

"From time to time," Durward said. "Just for sentimental reasons."

He put down the phone. It was still early in the afternoon, but he had done all the work he cared to do. Julie was waiting. She had been living at his flat since Sunday, when the Merriment had closed after D'amato's death, and each day he started for home a bit earlier, so he could be with her longer. He could picture her there now, relaxing in his home, perhaps darning his socks, preparing something delectable for dinner. And he'd come home, and drag her away from whatever she'd be doing, and carry her into the bedroom and peel off her clothes and kiss her swelling breasts and hold her body against his, and then they'd make love, as though love were being prohibited as of tomorrow —

He nudged his interphone.

"Miss Parkes?"

"Yes, Mr. Durward?"

"I'm leaving now. If there are any calls for me, take messages."

"But it's only three o'clock, Mr. Dur — "

"Yes, I know," he said crisply. "I'm leaving, all the same. See that everything's in order when you leave, Miss Parkes."

He got his hat and umbrella from the office closet, and his paper.

He walked to the door. Everything was fine, he thought. It was a gorgeous spring day, and in a few days more he'd be in Spain, on his — his honeymoon. Let tongues wag. He didn't care. Let people whisper that Howard Durward had married a retired stripper. To hell with them.

Durward smiled and stepped out into the hallway to ring for the elevator.

He was on his way home.

Home to Julie.

THE END

IN THE NUDE...

was the way he first saw her. Stark naked on the stage of the Merriment Revue Club, one of London's most exclusive Soho flesh-dens. He saw her prancing undressed, and his eyes fastened on her and would not tear away from her beauty. He had to know her, possess her, and later, when he had tasted the fruits of his desire he was shocked to find that he loved this sin club dancer, and she returned his love with a violent passion. Now they were trapped in a vicious web of their own making, for the affair could only ruin his life of respectability and denounce her as a shameful wanton. For the press would soon scream that Howard Durward was living in sin with —

...A NAKED LOVELY!